

Quality Care Animal Hospital
100 Rushing Drive
Herrin, Illinois 62948
(618) 997-4272

Heartworms In The Dog

Heartworms are very prevalent in Southern Illinois. As the name implies, the adult worms reside mostly in the right chamber of the heart as well as the larger blood vessels of the lungs. Although similar in appearance to intestinal roundworms, heartworms have a very different life cycle and cause much different medical problems.

Heartworms are transmitted from animal to animal through mosquitoes. The adult heartworms living in the blood within the heart are about the size of spaghetti. These worms produce microscopic baby heartworms (microfilaria) that circulate through the bloodstream. When a mosquito takes a blood meal from an infected animal then some of the microfilaria are ingested by the mosquito. Within the mosquito the microfilaria undergo some changes. Later, when the same mosquito bites an uninfected dog, there is a movement of the microfilaria from the mosquito into the new host animal. The microfilaria remain in the new host's skin for a while and then move into the bloodstream. Then, in roughly 4 to 6 months, these same "baby" heartworms become adult heartworms residing in the heart and lung vessels of the new host and producing their own babies.

More recent research has revealed that heartworms also have a bacteria called Wolbachia that is required for the heartworm to thrive and reproduce. Fortunately, this bacteria is susceptible to a readily available antibiotic. By killing the bacteria, the heartworms are tremendously weakened and unable to reproduce normally. The heartworms are then more susceptible to being killed with heartworm treatment.

IT ONLY TAKES ONE MOSQUITO BITE TO TRANSMIT HEARTWORMS. And it only takes missing ONE MONTH of heartworm prevention for this transmission to take place. For this reason it is extremely important for ALL dogs in our area to be on monthly year round heartworm prevention. Like the many viral and bacterial diseases that we vaccinate for, heartworms are also very preventable. Prevention involves a simple once-a-month chewable treat or topical medication containing a drug that kills any young baby heartworms that have come from mosquitoes. The prevention works by killing the microfilaria long before they get a chance to become adults. Dogs in Southern Illinois that are not on heartworm prevention have a very good chance of contracting heartworms. Even dogs that live strictly indoors but only go outside occasionally need to be on prevention.

In addition to year-round monthly heartworm prevention, we require a yearly heartworm test to detect any adult worms within the heart. This detects infections due to the animal spitting up the prevention without your knowledge or the animal not receiving the prevention at the right time. A single month of missed prevention is all it takes to allow heartworms to infect a dog. Also, keep in mind that the test we use will only detect infections that are over 6 months old. There is currently no test available that will detect infections that are less than 6 months old.