



Heartworm Disease in Dogs

Heartworm disease is a prolonged debilitating and potentially fatal disease even with the best Veterinary care available.

Once confined to the warmer northern areas of Australia, the disease is now prevalent in many areas around Melbourne. It is therefore essential for you to understand this disease and consider taking simple steps to prevent your dog from being at risk of infection.

Lifecycle

Dogs contract Heartworm when bitten by a mosquito carrying the heartworm larvae. The microscopic Heartworm Larvae migrate through the dog's skin and tissues into the blood stream finally ending up in the right side of the dog's heart and adjacent major blood vessels. These larvae then mature over several months into adult worms. (Adult Heartworm look like thin strands of spaghetti up to 35 cm long) These adult worms then produce microfilariae which are in turn taken up by a mosquito biting an infected dog. These mosquitoes then go on to infect other dogs.

Symptoms

Signs of Heartworm disease are related to the damage that occurs to the heart, lungs & other vital organs due to inflammation of blood vessel walls and obstruction of blood flow.

Most dog owners don't realise their pet has a problem until the disease is well advanced as dogs with an early infection usually show no symptoms. But even in the early stages of infection damage is still being done.

In the later stages of infection (when the disease is difficult to treat) dogs manifest the typical signs of advanced Heartworm disease - coughing, listlessness, fatigue, weight loss and abdominal distension due to fluid accumulation associated with chronic heart failure.

Diagnosis

Detection of Heartworm disease is by means of a blood test to determine if microfilaria and /or adult worms are present. This test is quick & reliable and can be performed in the surgery - results are usually available in 5 -10 minutes. Occasionally an infected dog will show a negative blood test. In these cases, if Heartworm disease is still suspected other blood tests, X-rays or Ultrasound may be necessary to confirm the diagnosis.



Treatment

Treatment of Heartworm is expensive & potentially dangerous to the dog. Treatment involves a stay in the Clinic Hospital and injections to kill the adult worms. Dogs must be monitored carefully for signs of drug toxicity. Further treatment is given later to kill any microfilariae in the dog's blood. Then if a subsequent blood test is negative preventative treatment is commenced, to stop the dog becoming reinfected.

Prevention

Heartworm prevention involves monthly medication with tablets or chewables. Or, daily medication with DEC tablets for the dog's entire life.

It is advisable to start pups on medication from 4 - 6 weeks of age, and it is important to increase the dose as the pup grows.

Dogs over six months of age should be blood tested and found to be free of Heartworm before being started on preventative tablets or a SEVERE AND POSSIBLY FATAL REACTION may occur. Both daily and monthly tablets are extremely safe in a dog that has been heartworm tested. In order to maintain protection from heartworm the preventative tablets once started must be given monthly or daily throughout the dog's life.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE. Although we can remove the heartworm from an infected dog we can never repair the irreversible heart and lung damage that the worms & developing larvae have caused.

Heartworm is becoming more prevalent in the Melbourne area. All dogs should be tested and placed on preventative therapy as soon as possible.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE!

Dogs make great pets and we hope you enjoy yours!