

Ask the Vet: What are heartworms and why do I need to get my dog tested?

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The canine heartworm, or *Dirofilaria immitis*, is a parasite that is transmitted from infected mosquitoes, typically during the summer months in this part of the country. As is expected with mosquito-borne diseases, it is more common near swampy areas and river bottoms, and the prevalence is variable depending on weather conditions, flooding, and the mosquito population. We often see a handful of cases every year with most of those coming from the Elk Point and Jefferson areas closer to the Missouri River, but we have had positive dogs from within the city limits of Akron.

So why do I need to be concerned about heartworms? First of all it is much easier and cheaper to prevent than to treat, and secondly, if left untreated, it can cause serious illness and may be life-threatening. Heartworms have a rather long and complicated life cycle, so it may take 4 to 6 months after a mosquito bite for adult heartworms to start reproducing in the animal, and it may be even longer before we are able to detect an infection. Our usual heartworm test involves drawing a small amount of blood and viewing it under a microscope. We are able to see the microfilaria, or offspring of the adult heartworm, in the blood of positive animals. We also have another test we can run to see if adult heartworms are present.

If we determine that your dog is negative for heartworms, we recommend a monthly preventative tablet during the summer months that will kill off immature heartworms before they can develop into adults. This medication also kills intestinal worms, so there is no need to double up with a regular dewormer. If your dog is positive for heartworms, it can be treated. However, the medication is very expensive, can be very hard on your dog, and may be difficult to obtain as it is not currently being manufactured in the U.S.

Then why do I need to get my dog tested? Can't I just put my dog on the preventative medicine? There are several reasons to get your dog tested. If your dog is positive, treatment should be initiated as soon as possible. The preventative only kills the young heartworms and does not affect the adults, which are the ones that get lodged in the heart and blood vessels of the lungs to cause problems. Secondly, since the heartworm life cycle is so long, it may take up to 12 months before we are able to detect them. If your dog tested negative last year, it is no guarantee that it will still be negative this year. Also, if sometime during last summer you forgot to give a preventative tablet or got behind a few days, an infected mosquito may have gotten a bite into your unprotected dog.

So bring your dog in if he or she has not been tested recently; the test is relatively cheap and simple. We'll get your dog set up on prevention for the summer, and your dog will thank you.