



HEARTWORM

Today more than ever you are hearing about a disease that poses a new and dangerous threat to your dog's health—heartworm. We want to address this problem through education so that you can better understand the heartworm threat and make informed decisions.

WHAT IS HEARTWORM?

Heartworms are parasites that live in a dog's heart and adjacent blood vessels. The adult worms, which live in the heart, produce young larva (called microfilaria) that circulate in an infected dog's blood. When a mosquito bites an infected dog it not only gets blood, but it can also pick up microfilaria. The microfilaria live inside the mosquito for two weeks after which they become capable of infecting other dogs. This occurs when the mosquito bites another dog, and the larva re-enter a dog's blood supply.

The infecting larva will migrate through its host's body and complete further stages of development before settling in its host's heart. At this stage it is approximately two inches long. After maturing for another three months, the microfilaria becomes an adult worm, reaching anywhere from five to nine inches long. The adult worm will begin releasing its own microfilaria into the new host's bloodstream. A severely infected animal can have up to 200 adult worms present in its heart.

SIGNS OF HEARTWORM DISEASE

Signs of heartworm disease include frequent coughing, exercise intolerance, difficulty breathing and excessive water consumption. Dogs that show signs of heartworm disease are usually in the advanced stages of infection. That is one reason testing is required before dispensing medication. If not controlled, heartworm disease can lead to heart failure.

TESTING

Effective diagnostic testing and reasonably priced preventative medications are available. It is necessary to have a heartworm test prior to using preventative medication.

Giving preventative medication to an infected dog poses serious risk to your dog's health. A blood sample is all that is needed for testing. If your pet tests positive on the test, further testing may be necessary before beginning preventative treatment. Your veterinarian will discuss these tests should the need arise.

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO DOGS IN WESTERN WASHINGTON?

The risk of heartworm infection in western Washington at this time is low. The official recommendation of the Washington State Veterinary Medical Association is that "dogs traveling to other areas of the US where heartworm disease is more prevalent should definitely be tested and placed on heartworm prevention medication." Preventive measures should be continued for 90 days after returning to western Washington. At Pilchuck, we consider leaving western Washington during mosquito season to be "entering an infected area." We feel that with a disease as devastating as heartworm, prevention is the only acceptable answer.