Heartworm Disease in Cats

Did you know that cats can get heartworms? All it takes is being bitten by an infected mosquito. While heartworm disease is more common in dogs, it is estimated that 10% of the cat population is infected with heartworms. However, this number may be higher because testing for heartworms in cats is not always accurate. In the Gulf Coast area, mosquitos live year-round, and being an indoor cat does not protect your cat from getting heartworms. Approximately 1/3 of infected cats live indoors.

As said above, cats get heartworms from mosquitos. After being bitten by a mosquito, it takes about 8 months for mature worms to appear in the heart. Female heartworms are usually 6 to 14 inches long (males are smaller) and live in the heart and the adjacent blood vessels of the heart and lungs. Mature heartworms look like strings of spaghetti. The average life span of heartworms in cats is 2 to 3 years with cats having an average of one to three worms. However, due to the small size of the heart, even this small number of worms can be significant.

Even though they are called heartworms, heartworm disease in cats is more a lung-related disease. The most common sign of heartworm disease in a cat is sudden death. Other acute symptoms may include collapse, difficulty breathing, vomiting and diarrhea. Some chronic signs can be more vague, such as coughing, lethargy/weakness, not eating, increased effort to breathe, and weight loss. Cats with heartworm disease rarely show signs of heart failure.

Cats tend to have problems with heartworms at two times in the life cycle—when the immature worms arrive in the heart and lung vessels and when the adult worms die. It takes six to eight months for immature worms to arrive in the heart after the cat is bitten by a mosquito. When these worms die, they release a toxin which causes a severe inflammatory response in the lungs causing severely acute clinical signs and then potentially death.

While blood tests are available for testing for heartworm infection in cats, they are not as accurate as they are in dogs. Testing the blood is still recommended, but a negative test does not rule out the presence of heartworms. Chest x-rays and heart ultrasounds are other tests that are used to help diagnose and determine severity of disease.
Can heartworm disease be treated in cats? There is no drug approved for treating heartworms in cats. Remember, it is when the worms die that the most severe symptoms occur. Treatment for heartworm disease can potentially cause acute lung failure and death in a small percentage of cats. When diagnosed with heartworm disease, most cats are treated symptomatically for the clinical signs with the expectation that the cat will outlive the heartworms. However, the damage to the lungs remains. Many asthmatic cats previously had heartworm infections.

Prevention is key! Preventing heartworms is safe and easy. While many products are available, we at Claws and Paws Veterinary Hospital recommend Revolution. This is a topical product that prevents heartworms, controls fleas, some intestinal parasites, sarcoptic mange and ear mites.

There are also oral medications available such as Heartgard and Interceptor. Do not use dog products for cats. The dosage of medication needed to prevent heartworm disease in cats is much higher than that for dogs.

As we end, I would like to leave you with a few facts:

Cats do get heartworms and 1/3 of those cats live completely indoors.

Prevention is safe and easy and needs to be given year-round.

Never use a medication if it is not approved for use in cats. Some dog medications are fatal for cats.

Please do not hesitate to call one of our friendly staff should you have questions about this topic or other issues. We also have a more detailed hand out on our website.

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