

FELINE HEART WORM DISEASE

Cats are susceptible to hear worms too!

Most people associate heartworm disease only with dogs, however, veterinarians are now diagnosing heartworm infections in cats as well. Similar to dogs, cats are infected when they are bitten by mosquitoes carrying immature forms of heartworms called larvae. The larvae then travel in the blood stream and eventually mature into adult heartworms in the heart. Unlike dogs who have large numbers of heartworms, affected cats only have a small number, usually less than three adult worms. The adults live in the heart of the cat for 3-4 years only. Heart worms are not treated in cats, but are allowed to persist until the worms die naturally. Treatment unfortunately is life threatening to a cat. In very infested areas, some veterinarians are putting cats on monthly preventative therapy which is safe and effective. Monthly heartworm prevention is aimed at killing the larvae in the blood stream BEFORE they mature into adults and settle in the heart.

Symptoms- similar to those of feline asthma

- Soft non-productive cough
- Exercise intolerance
- Shortness of breath
- Labored breathing
- Intermittent vomiting

Diagnosis

- **Lab tests-** checks blood for the presence of antibodies against heartworms & can test for the presence of antigen or proteins unique to the heartworms themselves. A positive antigen test confirms at least one living heartworm in the body. A positive antibody test confirms exposure to heartworms, but not necessarily an active infection.
- **Radiographs and ultrasound** are commonly used to eliminate other causes of heart and respiratory disease, such as asthma.
- Cats living in endemic areas for heartworm who are showing vague respiratory and heart signs should be screened for heartworm disease.

Treatment

Cats with heartworm disease are put on very low doses of aspirin to try to reduce the formation of blood clots due to the worms and steroids to reduce the inflammation in the lungs. Unfortunately, it is too risky to kill off the heartworms in cats. Cats are sensitive to the drug used and also tend to form more blood clots which cause serious respiratory problems when they lodge in the blood vessels of the lungs. It is recommended to put the cat on low doses of preventative medicine to eliminate chances of re-infection while waiting for the heartworms to die naturally. Owners should be aware that although unlikely, cats can die suddenly when infected with heartworms.

Prognosis

Generally fair to good although acute death can occur.