

Preventing Heartworms

For heartworm preventives to work, you must give them on time, every time.

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Millions of dogs in the United States get no heartworm preventive or get it inconsistently, according to the American Heartworm Society. Although treatable if caught early, heartworm disease is best attacked through prevention.

"It's so inexpensive to prevent the disease and so expensive to treat it," says Sheldon Rubin, DVM, chief of staff at Blum Animal Hospital in Chicago and secretary-treasurer of the Batavia, Ill.-based AHS, which promotes effective diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of heartworm.

About 55 percent of dogs get a heartworm preventive, but a third of those often miss scheduled doses, according to a Gallup survey of 18,000 veterinarians conducted in 2001. "That's where the problem is with compliance," says Donald Doiron, DVM, of the Doiron-Plauche Veterinary Hospital in Lafayette, La., president of the AHS. Dog owners must medicate their canine companions properly and on time, every time.

What Is It? Heartworm disease is exactly what it sounds like: parasitic worms, transmitted by infected mosquitoes, that live in the heart and lungs of mammals, mainly dogs.

With an infected mosquito's bite, larvae enter the dog's bloodstream and find their way to the heart and lungs, where they grow undetected for months. On average, dogs develop symptoms within seven months; by the time symptoms appear, the worms are fully grown.

Heartworms can grow to 10 to 14 inches, causing significant damage to the heart, lungs, and other vital organs.

Dogs at Risk "Mosquito infection knows no boundaries," says Jan Strother, DVM, of North Alabama Cat and Bird Veterinary Clinic in Hartselle, Ala., an all-animal clinic located in the midst of heartworm country.

Any dog, from an indoor puppy to an outside working dog, can get heartworm if bitten by an infected mosquito. To determine your dog's risk, talk to your veterinarian. Some parts of the country, especially in the South and Midwest, host more heartworm-carrying mosquitoes than others.

Areas with very cold winters usually have a marked mosquito season, and some veterinarians recommend preventives only during that time. Other states, such as Alabama, see mosquitoes all year, so dogs need year-round protection.