

Natural Dog Heartworm Preventives

What's an organic dog owner to do when it comes to preventing heartworm?

By Shawn Messonnier, DVM

Q. I'm a health fanatic for both myself and my 2-year-old service dog Larkin. I feed him organic dog food and make his treats. I also use diatomaceous earth (human food grade) for internal parasites, and sprinkle it on his coat for fleas and ticks. It works well. I don't want to give him regular heartworm medicine, as I lost my Boxer from heart issues complicated by heartworm medications. I would like to know if there is a natural alternative.

A. Yours is a question I am commonly asked, as many holistic pet owners prefer not to use any chemicals in or on their pets. While I appreciate your concern, it is important to prevent diseases such as heartworm disease, which afflicts many dogs around the country and is easily prevented.

In doing research for my book, the "Natural Health Bible for Dogs & Cats," I couldn't find any natural therapies consistently proven to safely prevent or treat heartworm infection in pets.

Diatomaceous earth can assist in controlling internal parasites, and may also help with fleas and ticks and possibly mosquitoes, which theoretically might reduce the chances of your pet contracting a heartworm infection. However, I would not rely upon it to be 100 percent effective in preventing parasite problems in your dog.

At this time, my best recommendation is for you to use an oral monthly conventional heartworm preventive medication. I do not recommend routinely using the oral or topical conventional chemical flea and tick control products, however. Most pets do not need them throughout the year, there are many natural ways to help control fleas and ticks, and these chemicals tend to persist in pets and in the environment for some time.

Fortunately, the oral heartworm medications only last in your dog's body for a few days. Due to their monthly dosing schedule, they provide year-round heartworm prevention when given at the correct dosage on a regular basis. Additionally, there is little medication in each flavored tablet.

Until a proven and safe natural prevention becomes available, I highly recommend using the conventional oral monthly heartworm preventives prescribed by your dog's veterinarian. If you're lucky enough to live in an area of the country where year-round prevention is not needed, only use the medication for a few months each year, further reducing your dog's exposure to the medication.

Shawn Messonnier, DVM, is the author of the "Natural Health Bible for Dogs & Cats" (Three Rivers Press, 2001). He also hosts a weekly satellite radio show called Dr. Shawn, The Natural Vet on Martha Stewart Living Radio.