

## **Canine Heartworm Disease**

If an infected mosquito bites your dog, a few months down the road your dog's heart could be filled with worms. Heartworms are difficult and expensive to treat, and if left untreated, they can be deadly.

It all begins with a parasite, technically known as *Dirofilaria Immitis*. The mosquito is the only means of transmission of this parasite. Therefore, as you might expect, heartworm disease is more common in areas where mosquitos are numerous and outdoor dogs are more likely to be infected. Upon entering a dog's body through a mosquito's bite, it migrates to the bloodstream and develops for a period of time. Then it settles in the right side of the heart and major blood vessels of the lungs. Here they develop to adults. Adult worms may reach lengths of 6 to 12 inches. Some dogs may have several hundred of them, although the number is usually much less.

Adult heartworms in the heart cause damage to several of your dog's organs. The lungs are usually the first organ to be affected. As the disease progresses, the heart becomes enlarged and begins to malfunction. Later, the liver and kidneys may also be damaged. A great deal of damage can occur before any signs of heartworm disease are noticed.

Dogs with heartworms may have a cough that becomes worse with exertion. They will become lethargic, lose weight, and may build up fluid in their abdomen. When the disease has reached its critical stage, damage to the vital organs is so severe that treatment is much more difficult and the possibility of recovery is lower.

Most dogs can be successfully treated for heartworms if the disease is detected early. Your veterinarian can detect heartworms by examining a blood sample from your pet. The test used is very accurate and is called an occult heartworm antigen test. This test is for antigens produced by the adult heartworms.

Fortunately, heartworms can be easily prevented by following your veterinarian's recommendation and giving your dog a monthly preventative. These medications must be given year around in areas where mosquito's are present. Have your veterinarian test your dog before starting prevention.