

### What is heartworm?

Heartworm is a parasitic disease of dogs and cats that is transmitted by mosquito's. It is not contagious between dogs and cats, or from dog to dog or cat to cat. An infected mosquito bites the pet, and injects a larval stage of the worm under the skin. This larval stage develops in the pet's tissues for 5 to 6 months, before becoming an adult worm in the heart and pulmonary blood vessels. These adult worms then mate and produce microfilaria (baby heartworm), which are then drawn up by a mosquito when it feeds on the pets, and the cycle begins again.

### What are the signs of heartworm?

#### **Dogs:**

Initially, little or no signs of infection may be seen. Heartworm is usually an insidious, or slow onset, disease. Months or years may pass before signs are seen. When symptoms appear, they are usually signs of early or more severe heart failure. The worms physically interfere with the mechanical action of the heart valves and cause inflammation and roughening in the blood vessels going to the lungs. The heart has to work much harder to pump the blood, and starts to become enlarged and dilated. The earliest signs may be shortness of breath, loss of stamina, or a nagging dry cough. As the disease progresses, breathing becomes more difficult, the abdomen may distend with fluid and the dog becomes lethargic, loses weight, and often stops eating. If left untreated, heartworm is nearly always fatal!

#### **Cats:**

Usually, there are few telltale signs in the cat. Heartworm may be associated with heart failure, a cough, vague ill – health, and can also cause sudden death, sometimes after the cat coughs up blood. One or two heartworm are enough to be fatal, and usually are!

### How do I know if my pet has heartworm?

A blood test is performed at the vet clinic. In the case of dogs, the test is very accurate, and results are often available before you leave the clinic. For cats, testing is less accurate because of the lower number of worms involved. False negatives are common when cats are tested for heartworm. X-rays or an ultrasound examination may be required to confirm an infection.

### Can heartworm be treated?

#### **Dogs**

Yes! However, treatment is not without its potential problems. Prevention is far better than treatment.

#### **Cats**

Treatment is difficult. There are no drugs approved for treatment of heartworm in cats, so prevention is far better.

### How do I prevent my pet getting heartworm?

#### **Dogs**

If your dog is over 6 months old, a blood test is necessary before you commence prevention. Prevention should begin at 6 to 8 weeks of age, and is achieved by giving medication, either on a daily or monthly basis. Daily medication comes in a tablet and a liquid form, and must be given each and every day to be effective. It is the cheapest form of prevention, but is also the most prone to failure. Monthly medication comes in tablet form, or in a beef flavoured chewable "lolly". Some types of monthly tablets help protect your pet against intestinal worms and even fleas as well!

#### **Cats**

A "once – a month" tasty chewy called Heartgard FX is given. Heartgard FX also helps control some of the intestinal worms.