Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Up Close

Dr. Marty Smith talks about . . . Heartworm Prevention

Please tell us a little about Heartworm Disease...

Dr. Smith: "Heartworm disease is a dangerous, but completely preventable infection where parasitic worms grow inside the chambers of your pet's heart and large blood vessels of the lungs. Left undetected, the disease can become serious and even result in death as worms eventually block blood flow to the heart and lungs. That's why heartworm prevention and early detection are so important."

Do you guarantee your heartworm preventives?

Dr. Smith: "We personally stand behind all of the heartworm preventives we carry. If your pet tests positive for heartworm at any point during the administration of preventive medications purchased through our pharmacy, you may be eligible for reimbursement of diagnostic and treatment costs. Our written guarantee has specific guidelines, so make sure to read it prior to starting any treatment for heartworm disease."

What if my pet is on a heartworm preventive that includes an intestinal wormer and he tests positive for intestinal worms?

Dr. Smith: "We believe that all pets deserve the best health care, which includes regular worming and heartworm prevention. We guarantee that we will stand by these heartworm/intestinal worm preventives and within specific parameters, will reimburse you for the positive fecal test and the treatment. We hope this written guarantee gives you peace of mind."

Is my pet at risk of getting heartworm?

Dr. Smith: "If not prevented with prescription heartworm medicine, yes. Heartworm cases have been reported in all of the lower 48 states, dispelling the old notion the disease occurred only in southern states. Your pet needs heartworm protection no matter where you live. Heartworm disease is most common in dogs, cats, and ferrets."

How could my pet get heartworms?

Dr. Smith: "Pets get heartworm disease from being bitten by a mosquito that has previously bitten another infected animal in your area. Mosquitoes transmit the parasites directly from bloodstream to bloodstream. It takes from three to five months for the heartworm larvae to migrate toward the heart, where they begin to grow into reproducing adults. Some have reached lengths of up to 14 inches."

So how can I help prevent my pet from getting heartworm?

Dr. Smith: "Veterinarians recommend a 3-part program as your best defense. A complete heartworm prevention program consists of having your veterinarian test your pet regularly for heartworm, giving your pet preventive heartworm medications as prescribed by your veterinarian, and reducing your pet's exposure to mosquitoes in the first place.

"There are mosquito repellents made especially for dogs that can help prevent mosquito bites, which can help prevent heartworm disease as well as West Nile Virus, another very serious condition spread by mosquitoes."

How long should my heartworm prevention program last?

Dr. Smith: "It's safest to keep up with your medications all year round so your pet's body is always protected against the parasite."

Are there risks associated with giving my pet a heartworm preventive?

Dr. Smith: "As with any medicines there is a very small health risk with heartworm preventives. In over 23 years of practice, I have never dealt with such a case. The benefit of heartworm prevention, however, far exceeds the slight risk. If your pet is not on a heartworm preventive year round, we recommend having your pet tested by your veterinarian before starting on a heartworm preventive.

"One heartworm preventive, called ProHeart 6, has been found to have an increased incidence of adverse affects and the FDA has asked for its voluntary recall. If your pet has been on ProHeart 6, see your veterinarian. He or she will likely switch you to an oral preventive like Heartgard Plus® or Tri-Heart Plus® after a period of months."

If my pet does get heartworm, what are the warning signs I should watch for?

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Dr. Smith: "Dogs with heartworm infections may show a cough, decreased appetite, weight loss, an inability to exercise, and general listlessness. In addition, cats also may exhibit breathing problems, vomiting, blindness, and seizures. You know your pet's personality best, so if you notice marked changes including these signs, you should take your pet in for testing as soon as possible."

Protect your pets year round... learn more about Heartworm Disease and Prevention.

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