Heartworm Disease: Prevention Costs Less Than Treatment

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

YOU WILL DO almost anything to ensure your pet does not become ill. Particularly when it is something as easy to prevent as heartworm disease.

Although heartworm is treatable, it may result in serious complications. Treatment is painful and can be very expensive depending on how extensive the diagnostic tests are, the stage of heartworm disease, the age of the pet, and other factors. No matter what it costs in dollars, the cost is even greater to the long-term health of your pet.

If your pet contracts heartworm disease, your veterinarian must proceed with treatment very carefully. Treatment includes using an adulticide and a microfilaricide for circulating larvae. The earlier the disease is treated, the less chance for harmful side effects.

DRUGS USED

- **Adulticide** - The adulticide of choice, and the one approved by the FDA, is Immiticide (melarsomine dihydrochloride), a compound derived from arsenic. The treatment can have adverse effects as the worms die and can potentially clog vessels in the lungs. Because of this risk, any dog being treated with an adulticide must be kept very quiet during treatment and for several weeks afterwards. The treatment will kill the adult worms, but the damage already done to the heart and lungs will remain. In severe cases, the worms may need to be surgically removed from the heart.

- **Eradicating microfilariae** - Several drugs used by veterinarians to kill microfilariae include milbemycin oxime, ivermectin, moxidectin, and selamectin - incidentally, all of these ingredients are used in heartworm preventives. Veterinarians may treat with these drugs over a period of weeks, or may choose to give these drugs as they would preventives over a 6-month period, so the microfilariae die-off is slower.

As you can see, treatment for heartworm disease is a complicated and expensive process, and it may take weeks for infected animals to recover. Some pets may have permanent damage to the heart. By investing in a preventive medication program, you will spare your pet from this deadly disease and its complicated and costly treatment.

For additional information, view our "How to Manage Heartworm" video.

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