



Animal Specialty Hospital of Florida

Exceptionally skilled. Uniquely compassionate.

Heartworm Disease:

Nick Schroeder, DVM DACVIM (cardiology)

Heartworm disease most commonly affects dogs, however cats are at risk as well. Heartworms are bloodborne parasites that are spread by the bites of mosquitoes. Adult heartworms live in the pulmonary arteries within the lungs. Mildly affected dogs may show no symptoms at all. Dogs that have more serious heartworm disease may have coughing, exercise intolerance, and in some cases heavy breathing. Severe infestations cause considerable inflammation and can result in pulmonary hypertension. This is an increase in the blood pressure within the lung tissue, and can result in secondary right-sided congestive heart failure. These patients typically have severe coughing, difficult or labored breathing and may suddenly die. Fortunately this disease is **PREVENTABLE**.

The diagnosis of heartworm disease is made using the history, physical examination, chest x-rays and blood testing. Patients with advanced heartworm disease may require echocardiography (ultrasound of the heart) to exclude other causes of congestive heart failure. Yearly testing for heartworm is recommended and can be done with your regular veterinarian.

Many heartworm preventatives are available. These typically consist of a dose of a type of antiparasiticide known as an avermectin. Monthly chewable tablets can be used, and non-ivermectin formulations are available as well. In southern Florida, **YEAR LONG** prevention is necessary to prevent heartworm infestation. Even patients that remain indoors exclusively should receive heartworm preventative. Your regular veterinarian can provide you with heartworm preventative.

Heartworm disease is treatable in many cases. The most common treatment for patients is a series of injections with a drug known as melarsomine (IMMITICIDE®). Depending on the severity and stage of heartworm disease, your veterinarian may elect different treatment protocols. Patients that have severe heartworm disease with pulmonary hypertension +/- congestive heart failure have a poor prognosis, which is why it is so important to keep up on monthly preventative.

Cats may occasionally develop heartworm disease. Unfortunately, testing for heartworm disease in cats is fraught with difficulty. Blood tests may be falsely negative. Chest x-rays may be within normal limits. Echocardiography (ultrasound of the heart) may fail to identify adult heartworms within the main pulmonary artery or proximal branches. Sometimes necropsy (animal autopsy) is the only way to confirm an infestation. Some cats may clear the infestation on their own and have transient respiratory trouble, which usually consists of coughing. Other cats may develop severe respiratory difficulty and pass away suddenly. Treatment with melarsomine in cats is unfortunately not possible, and corticosteroids are occasionally used in patients with symptoms. Monthly preventative is available for use in cats.