



Heartworm FAQs

Heartworm disease is serious, life threatening, and completely preventable. Heartworms cause severe lung disease, heart failure, other organ damage, and death in dogs, cats, and ferrets. Heartworm is treatable in dogs, but there is no cure for heartworm disease in cats.

HSSC's Animal Clinic offers in-house blood tests that can confirm if a dog has heartworm disease in a few minutes. The Animal Clinic also sells heartworm preventives at a fraction of the price of other providers.

Contact the Animal Clinic for Heartworm Pricing and to Schedule an Appointment.

Heartworm affects far too many canines, especially in Southwest Florida. HSSC is one of the few no-kill shelters that will take on the task of healing a heartworm positive dog. Every adoptable dog receives a blood test. If the dog is positive for heartworms, HSSC will treat the dog. Treatment is costly and time intensive, and, as a result, many shelters are unable to treat heartworm dogs. HSSC is fortunate to be able to do so. Hundreds of animals have been treated and given a second chance.

Here are the most frequently asked questions about heartworm disease. For additional information and resources, please visit the American Heartworm Society's website at www.heartwormsociety.org.

How do dogs get heartworm?

Only by the bite of an infected mosquito. There's no other way dogs get heartworms. And there's no way to tell if a mosquito is infected. That's why prevention is so important. A bite from just one mosquito infected with the heartworm larvae will give your dog heartworm disease. Once a dog is bitten by an infected mosquito, it takes about seven months for the larvae to mature into adult heartworms. They then lodge in the heart, lungs, and surrounding blood vessels and begin reproducing. Adult worms can grow up to 12 inches in length, can live five to seven years, and a dog can have as many as 250 worms in its system.

Is heartworm a regional problem?

While heartworm is prevalent in warm climates (like southwest Florida), heartworm disease has been reported in all 50 states. It's now found in areas where veterinarians used to say, "Oh, we don't have heartworm disease." Areas like Oregon, California, Arizona, and desert areas—where irrigation and construction are allowing mosquitoes to survive. And if you have mosquitoes and you have animals, you're going to have heartworms. It's just that simple.

Can people get heartworms from their dogs?

No, heartworm can only be passed on by mosquitoes. It's a specific parasite that only affects dogs, cats, ferrets, and other mammals. In rare cases, heartworms have infected people, but it does not complete its life cycle. The heartworm will migrate to the lungs and cause a round lesion that looks like a tumor. But these are very rare.

If one of my dogs has heartworms, can he give it to my other dogs?

No. The only way heartworms are transmitted is through the bite of an infected mosquito. Even if an uninfected mosquito bit your infected dog, and then bit your other uninfected dog the same night, he wouldn't transmit the parasite from one dog to the other. That's because when a mosquito bites an infected animal, the heartworm needs to undergo an incubation period in the mosquito before the mosquito can infect other animals.

Is it okay to adopt a dog with heartworms?

Heartworm is a very common problem in animal shelters today, and public shelters rarely have the money to treat heartworm disease. It's perfectly fine to adopt a dog with heartworms, but you have to be dedicated to having the disease treated appropriately, because it's a horrible disease that can lead to a dog's death if left untreated. Once treated, animals can lead full and active lives. Fortunately, HSSC has the means to treat heartworm positive dogs. All heartworm positive dogs from HSSC are treated for heartworm before adoption. Hundreds of dogs have been treated at HSSC and are now happy and healthy in their forever homes.

How can I prevent my dogs from getting heartworms?

For less than the cost of going to Starbucks for a weekly coffee, you can prevent heartworm disease in your dog. There are monthly chews and pills, topicals that you put on the skin, and there's also a six-month injectable product. The damage that's done to the dog and the cost of the treatment is way more than the cost to prevent heartworm disease. A year's supply of heartworm preventive will cost about \$35 to \$80, depending on a dog's weight. The Animal Clinic of HSSC sells heartworm preventives at very affordable prices.

What are the symptoms of heartworm infestations in dogs?

Initially, there are no symptoms. But as more and more worms crowd the heart and lungs, most dogs will develop a cough. As it progresses, they won't be able to exercise as much as before; they'll become winded easier. With severe heartworm disease, abnormal lung sounds can be heard, dogs can pass out from the loss of blood to the brain, and they can retain fluids. Eventually, most dogs will die if the worms are not treated. Only a blood test can confirm if a dog has heartworms. Every dog should be tested annually.

Once my dog has heartworms, what's the treatment? How much will it cost?

The drug that you treat with is called Immiticide. It's an injectable, arsenic-based product. The dog is given two or three injections that will kill the adult heartworms in the blood vessels of the heart. The safest way to treat heartworms includes an extensive pre-treatment workup, including X-rays, blood work, and all the tests needed to establish how serious the infection is. Then the dog is given the injections. With all the prep work, it can run up to \$1,000. But just the treatment can be done for about \$300 in some areas.

Why do I have to keep my dog quiet during the several months he's being treated for heartworms?

After treatment, the worms begin to die. As they die, they break up into pieces, which can block the pulmonary vessels and cause death. That's why dogs must be kept quiet and sedentary during the treatment and then for several months afterward. Studies have shown that most of the dogs that die after heartworm treatment do so because the owners let them exercise. It's not due to the drug itself.

If my dog is diagnosed with heartworms, can I just give him his monthly preventive instead of having him go through treatment? Won't that kill his heartworms?

Studies have shown that if you give ivermectin (the most common preventative) monthly to a dog with heartworm disease, after about two years you'll kill off most of the dog's young heartworms. The problem is that, in the meantime, all those heartworms are doing permanent damage to the heart and blood vessels. But if there's no way someone can afford the actual treatment, at least using the preventive monthly could be a lesser alternative.

Can I skip giving my dog his preventive during colder months, when there aren't any mosquitoes?

The American Heartworm Society recommends year-round heartworm prevention. One reason is, there's already a serious problem with people forgetting to give their dogs the heartworm preventatives. It's a universal problem. If you use a preventive year-round, and you miss a month, your dog will probably still be protected. But if you miss more than one or two months your dog could become infected. The other reason not to stop is that many of the preventives today also include an intestinal parasite control for roundworms, whipworms, or tapeworms. You want your dog to be protected against those at all times.

If I don't treat my dog with heartworms, will he "outgrow" his heartworms?

No. He stands a good chance of dying from the disease.

I've heard the treatment for heartworms can be dangerous. Are there any newer, safer alternatives?

Heartworm used to be treated with plain arsenic, which had many side effects. Current treatment protocols are safer and have fewer side effects, provided the drug is used correctly.

If my dog gets heartworms and is treated for them, can he get them again?

Yes, he can get them again. That's why regular prevention is so important.

Can cats get heartworm?

Yes, cats can get heartworm from mosquitoes, just like dogs. Heartworm disease is almost always fatal in cats because there is no approved treatment. Even indoor cats need to take a monthly heartworm preventive because mosquitoes can still get inside and bite an indoor cat.