

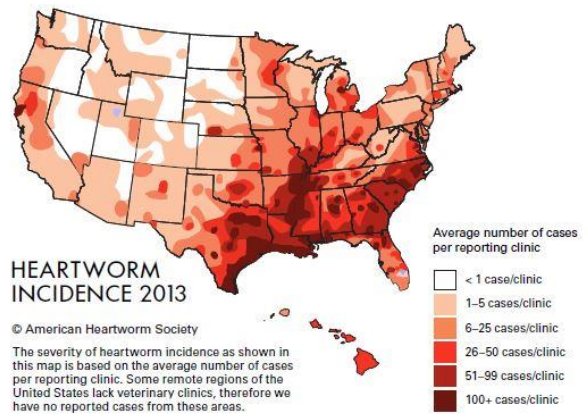


# Heartworms

Heartworms can cause a serious and potentially fatal disease but is easy to prevent. Routine testing and regular preventive medicine are a necessary part of your pet's health care.

## What are heartworms?

Heartworms are 12 inch long parasites that live in the heart and lungs of cats and dogs. These worms can live up to 5-7 years and cause serious damage to the heart and lungs. Heartworms have been found in all 50 states.



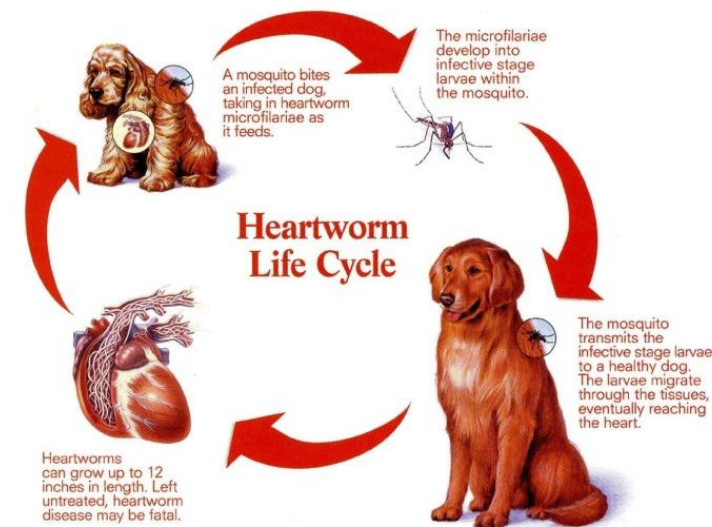
## How is my pet infected?

Heartworms are transmitted by mosquitoes. Adult heartworms produce microfilaria (the "babies") in the bloodstream. Mosquitoes pick up microfilaria by biting an infected animal. Inside the mosquito the microfilaria become larvae.

Once a mosquito bites your pet, it injects the larvae into the skin. They then travel throughout the body and settle in the heart and lungs where they develop into adults. It takes 6 months from the time your pet is infected until they become adults that are producing microfilaria.

## What will a heartworm infection do to my pet?

The worms cause major damage to the heart and lungs. Due to their size, they can also block blood flow in the heart and lungs. In the beginning of the disease, your pet may seem normal. As the damage worsens, your pet will tire easily and may develop a cough. Eventually heart failure occurs.



## Why does my pet need heartworm prevention?

Every cat and dog has the potential to get heartworms. Heartworm prevention protects your cat or dog from becoming infected with adult heartworms. A monthly treatment kills the immature life stages before they can become adults. There is no protection after the medication is given so it must be continued every month.

Cats tend to develop respiratory signs such as coughing, wheezing, or difficulty breathing. These signs are due to lung damage and commonly are mistaken for asthma. Sadly, heartworm disease has also been known to cause sudden death.

**How are heartworms treated?**

Your pet will need testing including x-rays and blood tests to evaluate the extent of damage to the heart and lungs. A treatment plan is then developed. Treatment for dogs involves killing the adult worms with an arsenic compound. This treatment is expensive and dangerous. You also need to keep your dog quiet for several months during the treatment. There is no treatment for cats.

**My dog is on heartworm prevention. Why does he need a heartworm test?**

There are several factors that can affect how well the heartworm prevention is working such as expired medicine, insufficient medicine (wrong size for the dog), exposure to excessive heat or cold, and drug resistance. Some pets are also known to spit out medicine and sometimes we just forget to give it.

A yearly heartworm test allows your vet to identify any possible problem early and treat sooner. The sooner a heartworm infection is identified and treated, the better the outcome for your pet.

**Why doesn't my cat need a yearly heartworm test?**

A cat's body reacts differently to a heartworm infection and they often don't have adult worms. Because of this, the current heartworm tests available may not show an infection. That's why it's even more important to keep cats on preventive medicine. The immature worms still cause extensive damage to cats.



**My cat is indoors only. Does she really need heartworm prevention?**

Yes! Mosquitoes can get indoors. Since the disease is so serious, it is best to prevent the disease. Also, cats may not show signs of heartworm disease until it is too late. Studies have shown many cats with heartworms stay indoors all the time.

**I forgot to give last month's heartworm prevention! Now what?**

You should continue the heartworm prevention as soon as you remember. It takes 6 months for a heartworm infection to show up on a test. After 6 months, your dog should have a heartworm test performed to make sure no infection has occurred.

**How soon should my puppy or kitten start on heartworm prevention?**

Puppies and kittens should start on heartworm prevention when they are 8 weeks old. They should stay on heartworm prevention for the rest of their life.

**When doesn't my puppy need a heartworm test?**

Since it takes 6 months for the infection to develop to adult worms which produce microfilaria (offspring), most puppies have a heartworm test performed between 8-12 months of age. Until then, your puppy should still be receiving heartworm prevention.

For more information, visit the American Heartworm Society at [www.heartwormsociety.org](http://www.heartwormsociety.org).

