



# Heartworm Disease in Cats

Preventive measures can protect your cat against this serious, potentially life-threatening condition.

Despite the fact that heartworm disease is nearly 100% preventable, many cats are diagnosed with it each year.

## WHAT IS HEARTWORM DISEASE?

The infection occurs when an infected mosquito bites a cat's skin, allowing microscopic heartworm larvae to enter the cat's bloodstream. Over time these larvae thrive and develop into parasitic worms (heartworms). Although the name of the disease suggests that it mainly affects the heart, the mature parasite eventually resides in the cat's pulmonary arteries, which carry blood from the heart to the lungs. The scientific name for the heartworm parasite is *Dirofilaria immitis*.

Though cats usually have fewer heartworms than dogs and the worms may not grow as big, the presence of even a few immature worms can cause lung damage. This condition is called heartworm-associated respiratory disease (HARD).

## SIGNS OF HEARTWORM DISEASE

The signs of heartworm infection in cats can be confused with signs of many other diseases, including feline asthma. The most common signs include: intermittent vomiting (sometimes of blood as well as of food); diarrhea; rapid and difficult breathing, coughing, and gagging; loss of appetite; lethargy; and weight loss. Some cats with heartworm disease never show



any signs, but sometimes the only sign of infection is sudden death.

## DIAGNOSIS

Heartworm disease often goes undiagnosed in cats. Diagnosing feline heartworm disease typically involves a complete blood count and blood chemistry profile, chest X-rays, a test to determine whether the patient's blood contains antibodies to the parasite, and a test to see whether adult heartworm proteins are present in the blood. Ultrasound imaging may be able to show the presence of heartworms in the heart or pulmonary vessels. Unfortunately, these tests can also be inconclusive.

Unlike heartworm disease in dogs, there are no good treatment options for heartworm in cats.

## Did You Know?

- Feline heartworm disease is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition that attacks the lungs, heart, and related blood vessels.
- Heartworm disease is transmitted through a mosquito bite.
- Unlike heartworm disease in dogs, there are no good treatment options for heartworm in cats.
- Heartworm disease has been diagnosed in all 50 states.
- The key to avoiding feline heartworm disease is the routine administration of preventive medications.

## Heartworm Disease in Cats *continued*

The American Heartworm Society recommends that you get your cat tested every 12 months for heartworms and give your pet a heartworm preventive year-round.



### The Myths About Feline Heartworm Disease in Cats

**Myth:** Only dogs can get heartworms.

**Myth Buster:** Other mammals can contract heartworm disease, including cats.

**Myth:** Keeping a cat indoors prevents infection.

**Myth Buster:** Mosquitoes can sneak inside and infect your house cat.

**Myth:** It's too difficult to give a cat a heartworm preventive medication.

**Myth Buster:** Your veterinarian can provide tips for properly administering heartworm prevention.

The treatment that is regularly used to treat dogs with heartworms is not safe to use in cats, so it is, so it is critically important to prevent the infection in the first place.

### TREATING HEARTWORM DISEASE

In some cases, surgical removal of the worms from the heart may be recommended. However, the surgery is costly and carries significant risk. Because there is no good treatment for heartworm disease in cats, your veterinarian will determine how to monitor your pet and manage the symptoms of disease.

### PREVENTING HEARTWORM DISEASE

Although heartworm disease is challenging to diagnose and has no approved, effective, or safe treatment, there are highly effective, safe, easy-to-administer preventive medications such as moxidectin, selamectin, milbemycin, and ivermectin. Because mosquitoes can be found indoors, current recommendations are to provide year-round heartworm prevention for all cats. These topical (“spot on”) or oral medications are inexpensive compared to the dangers of the disease for your cat.

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