

FELINE HEARTWORM DISEASE



Feline heartworm disease is a condition which for some years was unknown as a diagnosis, as most authorities thought that only members of the dog family and a few other animals, such as the badger could suffer from it.

It is a serious disease that results in severe lung disease, heart failure, other organ damage, and death in pets, mainly dogs, cats, and ferrets. The severity of this disease is directly dependent upon the number of worms present in the body, the duration of the infestation, and the response of the host

What Causes It?

Heartworm in cats is caused by a parasitic worm called *Dirofilaria immitis*, a parasitic nematode (roundworm) commonly referred to as the heartworm.

How is it Transmitted?

Heartworms are spread through mosquitoes and sometimes fleas, having ingested infected blood from an infected animal, then biting another animal. The larvae migrate from the bite wound through the body until they reach the heart and blood vessels of the lungs. Here, the larvae mature and reproduce, releasing immature heartworms, into the animal's blood.

It is important to note that the presence of these immature heartworms in the blood, although common in dogs, is in fact uncommon in cats, and has been seen in less than 20 percent of infected cats.

It is also important to note that because heartworms in cats have a much shorter lifespan than those that infect dogs, a cure without treatment is more likely to occur.

Which Cats Are At Risk?

Wherever dogs are considered to be at risk, cats are at risk as well. Feline Heartworm is not very common in domestic cats, although it is relatively common in feral populations.

Signs and Symptoms.

The most common signs are:-

- persistent coughing
- difficulty with breathing.
- lack of appetite and
- vomiting,
- a heart murmur or otherwise irregular heart beat.

Signs and symptoms may appear gradually over a number of years and eventually the cat's heart may fail.

Sometimes the heartworm infestation will suddenly reach critical numbers and the cat will experience seizures, blindness and sudden collapse and death

Diagnosis

It is an extremely difficult disease to diagnose, as there is no reliable blood test and an echocardiograph doesn't always show the worms, which can be tiny in the cat and often in relatively small numbers.

However there are a variety of tests that may be done to aid diagnosis include a urine analysis, x-rays which may reveal the enlargement of certain veins or arteries associated with heartworm disease, and an electrocardiograph (ECG), which may help identification of worms in the heart or pulmonary artery.

Treatment

There is really nothing that can be considered a cure for heartworm, so treatment is mainly an attempt to keep the heart and lungs working as healthily as possible and to boost the cat's wellbeing and immune system.

Drugs to stabilise the heart may be given and if the cat has become very dehydrated with vomiting and lack of appetite, intravenous fluids might be necessary.

There is currently no treatment for cats that would kill the adult heartworms in the body. A surgical procedure to remove the adult worms is possible, but because heartworms in cats have a much shorter lifespan than those that

affect dogs, a spontaneous cure is more likely to occur, so that no such treatment is necessary.

Various medications may be used in order to help treat the symptoms

Prevention.

Wherever dogs are considered to be at risk for heartworms, cats are at risk as well

This is why it is so important for all cats to receive heartworm prevention.

Heartworms can be preventable by:-

- using one of a number of specific anti-worm medications available, used as a spot-on treatment, year round that are highly effective and commonly used.
- reducing your pet's exposure to mosquitoes - this means making your pet's environment less hospitable to mosquitoes. This decreases the risk of your pet being infected with heartworm in the first place.

These are really the only line of defence.

Prevention is covered fully in the "**PREVENTION OF DISEASES IN CATS**" section above

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