



Feline Heartworm Disease

FACTS

Heartworm disease is a serious and potentially fatal disease in cats. While it has traditionally been thought of as a "dog only" problem, heartworms are being diagnosed with increasing frequency in cats. In fact, it is at least as common as the feline leukemia virus (FeLV), the feline AIDS virus (FIV), and the FIP virus. Random studies have demonstrated antibody titers (meaning exposure to the parasites) in 20-30% of cats. Surprisingly, it appears that strictly indoor cats are as likely or even more likely to develop the disease as cats who live outside. The reason for this is probably because cats that are constantly exposed to mosquitoes can develop immunity to the worms, whereas strictly indoor cats are less exposed and have not developed immunity.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms can include coughing (asthma-like signs), vomiting, diminished appetite, listlessness, weight loss and even collapse or sudden death. Early stages of infection may show no signs of sickness at all.

HEARTWORM LIFE CYCLE

Heartworm larvae are transmitted to cats through the bite wound of a heartworm-infected mosquito. These larvae develop into mature adults, which travel to the heart and lung vessels where they can live for 1-2 years. During this time the adult heartworms reproduce by releasing offspring called microfilaria, which can be picked up by another feeding mosquito and eventually transmitted to another animal. Since microfilaria are found more readily in dogs than cats, dogs are the most common source of infection for mosquitoes.

DIAGNOSIS

Detection of heartworms is not as straightforward in cats as it is in dogs. There are two types of blood tests: an antibody test and an antigen test. The antibody test looks for exposure to heartworms, not the actual presence of the worms. Just like in people, antibodies are formed by the body in response to exposure to any "foreign" protein in the blood stream. If the cat has been exposed to the worms in the past, the antibody test will be positive. The next step in an antibody positive cat is to do the antigen test, looking for the presence of the worm. If there are enough female worms present in the heart and lungs, the antigen test will be positive, confirming the diagnosis.

If the antibody test is negative, the cat has not been exposed and there is no need for the antigen test. This may sound simple enough but unfortunately the tests can be difficult to interpret at times and it is possible to do the tests and still not be 100% sure of the heartworm status. In light of this, we do not routinely recommend a heartworm test prior to starting monthly prevention.

Treatment

Unlike canine heartworm disease where treatment is usually safe and effective, treatment in cats is associated with many complications including death. Because of this, our focus is on prevention.

PREVENTION

Heartworm disease is very preventable and it is far easier to prevent the disease than it is to treat it. A topical medication called Revolution is applied at home once a month to the skin on the cat's back or neck. Very safe and extremely effective, this medication is also a wonderful flea, intestinal parasite and ear mite preventative. The great thing about using Revolution is since it is topical, you don't need to worry about giving your cat a pill or tablet!

For people who wish to give their cat a monthly tablet, Heartgard is available. It is a very good heartworm preventative, although it does not protect against fleas or ear mites.



With Proper Monthly Heartworm Prevention, Your Cat Doesn't Need Nine Lives!

You don't have to feel helpless against heartworm disease. You can protect your cat. That's because heartworm disease can be prevented. Each dose of Revolution gives your cat an entire month of protection, and gives you peace of mind knowing your best friend is protected.



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