

Fact Sheet

What if My Dog Tests Positive for Heartworm?

No pet owner wants to hear that her dog has tested positive for heartworm, but the good news is that most infected dogs can be successfully treated. The goal is to first stabilize your pet if it is showing signs of disease, then kill all adult and immature worms – while keeping drug side effects to a minimum.

Here's what you should expect if your dog tests positive:

Confirm the diagnosis

Once a dog receives the diagnosis of heartworm disease, it must be verified with an additional, different test. Because the treatment regimen is both expensive and complex, your veterinarian will want to be absolutely sure that treatment is necessary.

Restrict exercise

This requirement might be difficult to adhere to, especially if your dog is accustomed to being active. Your dog's normal physical activities must be restricted as soon as the diagnosis is confirmed, because physical exertion increases the rate at which the heartworms cause damage in the heart and lungs. The more severe the symptoms, the less activity your dog should have.

Stabilize your dog's disease

Before actual heartworm treatment can begin, your dog's condition may need to be stabilized with appropriate therapy. In severe cases of heartworm disease or when a dog has another serious condition, this process can take several months and occasionally, some dogs cannot be adequately stabilized and are therefore, poor candidates for treatment.

Customize the treatment

Once the veterinarian has determined your dog is stable and ready for heartworm treatment, he or she will develop the appropriate protocol for your dog. The American Heartworm Society has guidelines for developing this plan of attack.

Dogs with no signs or mild signs of heartworm disease, such as cough or exercise intolerance, have a high success rate with treatment. More severe disease can also be successfully treated, but the possibility of complications is greater. The severity of heartworm disease does not always correlate with the severity of symptoms, and dogs with many worms may have few or no symptoms early in the course of the disease.

Killing adult heartworms

There is currently only one drug approved by the FDA for treating canine heartworm disease. Melarsomine dihydrochloride (Immiticide®) is administered by injection into the lumbar muscles of the lower back. This drug therapy requires multiple injections and hospitalizations.

Additional medications

Your dog may also receive other drugs, such as a heartworm preventive and doxycycline to get rid of immature heartworms (microfilariae), and steroids to help reduce the risk of post-treatment complications.

“Slow-kill” method not recommended

Pet owners who frequent certain websites and message boards may see information on what is called the “slow-kill” method – treating heartworm for an extended period of time with a heartworm preventive instead of using melarsomine. The American Heartworm Society does not recommend or endorse this approach for several reasons. The “slow-kill” method can take as long as three years to rid the dog of all heartworms, so with this approach, the parasites continue to cause damage to the heart and lungs. In addition, because exercise restriction must be practiced throughout the process as the owner and veterinarian wait for the worms to die, “slow kill” can seriously impair the dog's quality of life.

Test (and prevent) for success

About six months after treatment is completed, your veterinarian will want to perform a heartworm test to confirm that all heartworms have been eliminated. And to avoid the possibility of your dog contracting heartworm disease again, you'll want to follow the Think 12 guidelines and continue to administer a heartworm preventive all twelve months of the year.

