

Heartworm Hero

Every pet, every visit.



April is Heartworm Awareness Month and a great time to double your efforts to communicate the importance of annual testing and year-round prevention with clients. And we have the perfect person to inspire you – **Chris Rehm, Sr., DVM**, a true “heartworm hero.”

Dr. Rehm and his partners operate four veterinary clinics in Mobile and Baldwin counties in southern Alabama. He is one of 11 veterinarians, and has a support staff of 80. Their patient base is roughly 85 percent dogs and 15 percent cats. Dr. Rehm is a member of the American Veterinary Medical Association, the Alabama Veterinary Association, Mobile-Baldwin Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association and on the board of the American Heartworm Society. He has hosted a local hour-long talk show for 18 years and a public service spot on the local CBS affiliate called “Your Pet’s Health.”

Taking the challenge

“This is an important time to be part of the heartworm prevention initiative,” he says, “because of the current economic challenges we’re all facing and the lack of efficacy seen in some areas. That’s why efforts to stress proper use of heartworm preventives are so important. When people fail to give pets their medication on time, heartworm-positive pets can fly under the radar undiagnosed.”

Although Dr. Rehm doesn’t claim to have the perfect answer for improving compliance, his team has a mantra – “every pet, every visit” – that serves as a reminder to talk about heartworm prevention every time they see a cat or dog in the clinic.

“We let people know that prevention is the best medicine,” he says. “We start the conversation at the very first visit and never let up. We see our patients for wellness visits twice a year and, because we’re in a heartworm-endemic area, we test for heartworm at both appointments.”

Ways to boost compliance

The team has several strategies for keeping clients on track.

- Keeping track of purchase history
- Providing a report card at each visit with test results, list of medications, dates for administering heartworm preventive and calendar reminder stickers
- Sending a reminder when half the doses are left and again when one dose is remaining
- Encouraging clients to sign up for online reminders through remindmypet.com

Stressing a serious message

Because the entire veterinary team understands the importance of heartworm prevention, clients also understand it’s not something to ignore. New staff members shadow experienced team members and everyone participates in weekly training to ensure all clinic protocols are understood and properly carried out. They also “live” the heartworm message by giving heartworm medication to their own pets. “We see animals die from heartworm disease. We had a case today, in fact,” says Dr. Rehm. “It’s a dangerous, potentially fatal disease requiring serious discussion.”

Although Dr. Rehm practices near the Mississippi Delta where questions about heartworm preventive lack of efficacy have surfaced, the Rehm clinics have not experienced issues with efficacy. Most heartworm-positive cases are readily explained by breaks in purchase history (meaning doses have been missed) or a pet owner failing to adjust dose size as a pet grows to adulthood. In addition, many heartworm-positive pets are rescues.

Every month is heartworm awareness month

Dr. Rehm doesn’t view April as the only month to emphasize heartworm prevention. “We talk about it, we probe, we ask, we encourage,” he says. “We tell clients it’s much easier – and much less expensive in the long run – to prevent heartworm disease than it is to treat it.” Because clients get the message loud and clear, most of them are compliant and their pets stay heartworm free.