

Heartworm and your dog



Heartworm (*Dirofilaria immitis*) is a parasite that is spread by mosquitoes, so your pet does not even need to be in contact with other pets to become infected!

Heartworm has a complicated life cycle. Infected dogs have microfilariae, an immature form of heartworm, circulating in their bloodstream. Microfilariae are sucked up by mosquitoes when feeding on the blood of infected dogs. The immature parasite develops into a heartworm larva inside the mosquito, and a single bite from a carrier mosquito can infect your pet.

As the heartworms mature in the dog's heart, they can cause a physical blockage as well as thickening of the heart and associated blood vessels. In the early stages of infection there may be no visible signs, however infection may eventually lead to signs of heart failure (reluctance to exercise, lethargy, coughing) and even death. Heartworm is present throughout most of Australia, especially the Top End.

Thankfully, heartworm is very easy to prevent and should form part of your pet health care routine. We have very effective preventative treatment options available including monthly tablets, chews, top-spots and even an annual heartworm injection for dogs (Proheart), administered by one of our vets.

If your dog is not on heartworm prevention and is over 6 months of age, we strongly recommend a heartworm test prior to starting a prevention program, followed by a repeat test 6 months after commencing.

Once started, it is important that your dog is kept up to date with heartworm prevention. If your dog has missed a yearly injection or monthly treatment, we strongly recommend a heartworm six months from the last missed dose. Sometimes, a follow up test is required 6 months later.

In the case of heartworm, prevention is definitely better than cure, as treatment is expensive and not without risk.

If you have any further questions about heartworm prevention and how best to care for your furry family members, the vets and nurses at University Avenue Vet Hospital are here to help – just call us on 8931 0455.