



Guide To Feline Heartworm Disease

When you think of heartworm disease, do you assume it's only a problem in dogs? Or only an issue with outdoor cats? Actually, cases of heartworm disease in cats (indoor-only and outdoor alike) are increasing steadily all over the country (even in "cold" states like Michigan). And unlike the disease in dogs, there is **no cure** for heartworm disease in cats. The drug used to treat the disease in dogs is highly toxic to cats and cannot be used. So what do you do to prevent this deadly disease? The answer: a simple **once a month** chewable treat or topical liquid application. It's so easy to do, and in doing so, you are assuring your feline friend a lifetime free of these nasty and deadly parasites.



So what exactly is feline heartworm disease?

The disease is caused by infiltration of the parasite *Dirofilaria immitis*. The larvae are transmitted by mosquitoes (which, as we all know, get into your house in the summer and can bite you or your cat). The adult heartworms plug up the right ventricle and pulmonary arteries of the cat's heart, impeding blood flow out of the heart and into the lungs where the blood should pick up oxygen to supply to the rest of the body. Lack of oxygen to body tissues will cause serious clinical signs and sometimes sudden death.

How could my cat get heartworm disease?

The larvae are deposited under the cat's skin through the saliva of a mosquito while it is taking a blood meal. The larvae then migrate into the circulatory system, zoom through your cat's blood, and finally settle in the heart where it takes them 6 months to grow to a full-size adult worm (which measures 5 to 8 inches long!). The adult worms reproduce in the heart and sends microfilariae (baby heartworms) circulating through the cat's blood. They, too, will eventually mature into adult worms and further plug up the right ventricle and pulmonary arteries of the heart. It only takes 1 heartworm to cause death in a cat, whereas it takes many more to kill a dog.

What are the clinical signs of heartworm disease?

Clinical signs are symptoms that you can outwardly see and observe. Clinical signs of heartworm disease can be non-apparent to severe, depending on the individual cat and the degree of infection. Signs may include coughing, wheezing, difficulty breathing, rapid breathing, vomiting, fainting, salivation, lethargy, weight loss, anorexia (not eating), acute blindness, seizures, and sudden death. Feline heartworm disease can have similar symptoms as feline asthma and inflammatory bowel disease and can be easily overlooked and under-investigated.

How is heartworm disease diagnosed?

Diagnosis includes a blood test that is usually sent to an outside laboratory for antibody and antigen testing. Antibody testing looks at your cat's immune response to a possible heartworm infection. Antigen testing includes looking for specific proteins that are present on the circulating microfilariae (baby heartworms) in the blood. The test results are usually available to your doctor within a week to 10 days.

Is feline heartworm disease treatable?

Currently, there is no known cure for feline heartworm disease. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, adult heartworms can be slowly killed in dogs by administering an arsenic-containing drug. Unfortunately, arsenic is highly toxic to cats and causes a fatal reaction.



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So how can I prevent heartworm disease in my cat?

Fortunately, this disease has a very simple and effective method of prevention. All that's required is giving your cat a beef-flavored chewable tablet once a month (Heartgard®) or by applying a small amount of topical liquid once a month (Revolution®). If given correctly every month, these preventatives have a 100% rate of effectiveness. They both come in boxes of six doses, which will last you for six months. Individual doses may also be purchased to ensure your cat gets the correct protection throughout the heartworm-prevalent months.

When does heartworm season begin and end?

Here in Michigan, mosquitoes start appearing round-about April and start disappearing around November (or the first frost). Some people prefer to keep their cats protected year-round, which means that you will always be in the habit of giving the preventative every month, *and* your cat will have the highest measure of protection possible. People who live in low-lying or densely wooded areas (where there is a possibility of high mosquito populations) should be especially vigilant and never fail to be on time with the preventative each month.

Where can I get the preventatives, Heartgard® or Revolution®, for my cat?

Your current veterinarian will have both products readily available year-round. Your cat will need to be examined by a doctor within 1 year of dispensing the preventative since it is a prescription medication.

Can I get more information about Heartgard® and Revolution®?

The Cat Practice has brochures on both products that you can take home to read. You can also ask your technician or doctor for details about each product – we will answer any questions you may have about them or about heartworm disease.

Heartworm disease, as deadly as it is to our beloved feline friends, is so easily preventable that it wouldn't make sense *not* to use a preventative. If your cat is not currently on a monthly preventative regimen, ask your technician or doctor about taking some home with you today!

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