

Fact Sheet

Will Heartworm Preventives Protect My Pet?

Year-round administration of an approved preventive is your pet's best defense against deadly heartworm disease. While some concerns have arisen in recent years about the potential for heartworms to become resistant to common heartworm medications, the facts do not indicate that you should stop using them. Instead, you should make sure you understand how you can best protect your pet.

How do preventives work?

Heartworm prevention medications are given monthly or at six-month intervals, depending on the product. These medications do not actually prevent pets from becoming infected with heartworm; they work by helping kill new, developing heartworms that have infected the pet between doses. Resistance occurs when a heartworm isn't affected by the medication and matures into an adult. The result is heartworm infection.

Is resistance common?

Several research studies have confirmed that resistant worms can develop in dogs. However, there are no indications that resistance is common—nor is resistance increasing at a rapid rate. While reports have mostly been limited to the south-central United States, where heartworm infection is most prevalent, resistant heartworms could develop in other locations as well. Should heartworm infection result from the failure of a heartworm preventive, the infection can be successfully treated.

What should I do for my pet?

The most important step is to continue to give your dog or cat its heartworm medication faithfully. Approximately 1 million dogs in the U.S. are estimated to have heartworm disease, and the most common reason is failure to provide year-round prevention. Prevention offers the best protection available to pets and is effective in the vast majority of cases.

The other important step is to follow the American Heartworm Society (AHS) guidelines for heartworm prevention and treatment. Specific recommendations include the following:

- Puppies and kittens should be started on a heartworm preventive as early as possible, no later than 8 weeks of age. Only use heartworm preventive medications approved for pets and prescribed by your veterinarian.
- Give heartworm preventives as directed. Make sure your pet gets the right dose (no more, no less) for its weight and give the medication on schedule. Large-animal medications should never be administered as preventives.
- Dogs and cats over 6 months of age put on heartworm preventive for the first time should be tested before dosing is started. Dogs should be tested a second time six months later and thereafter a minimum of once a year. Early detection provides the best opportunity for treatment success.
- If your dog tests positive for heartworms, do not use unapproved therapies such as the “slow-kill” method, which is a term for using heartworm preventives alone as a treatment. This approach puts a pet's health at risk and can actually increase the chances of developing resistance. It's also essential to work closely with a veterinarian. Treatment includes the use of a prescription drug called melarsomine, which kills adult heartworms, as well as other medications.
- Ask your veterinarian for recommendations on minimizing mosquito exposure, since mosquitoes spread heartworm.

The best offense against heartworm disease is a good defense. Follow AHS recommendations and Think 12: Give heartworm preventives 12 months a year and test your dog every 12 months.

