

HEARTWORM

RAGofAZ TESTS ALL GOLDENS FOR HEARTWORM



THE DISEASE

Adult heartworms in the heart lay very tiny larvae called microfilaria, which then live in the bloodstream. This microfilaria enters a mosquito when it sucks blood from an infected animal. In 2-3 weeks, the microfilaria develops into larger larvae in the mosquito and migrates to the mosquito's mouth. When the mosquito bites another animal, the larvae enter the animal's skin. The larvae grow and after about three months finish their migration to the heart, where they grow into adults, sometimes reaching a length of 14 inches. The time from when an animal was bitten by an infected mosquito until adult heartworms develop, mate, and lay microfilaria is about 6-7 months in dogs. In dogs, the adult worms can obstruct the various large blood vessels leading from the heart to the lungs. Worms may also enter smaller vessels in the lung and obstruct those vessels, as well. In severe cases, called "caval syndrome" worms start to fill the right ventricle of the heart.

Symptoms

Most dogs with heartworm infection do not show signs of disease. Some dogs may show decreased appetite, loss of weight, and listlessness. Often, the first sign of the disease is a cough. Animals with severe heartworm disease will start to show lack of endurance during exercise. Some will accumulate fluid in their abdomen that makes them look pot-bellied. In rare situations in which animals have many adult worms, the animals may die of sudden heart failure.

Diagnosis

Blood tests can determine the presence of heartworm.

Treatment

Treatment is hard on the dog's system and can be expensive. Melarsomine, the medication currently used to treat heartworm infection, contains arsenic. It is given by injection deep in the muscles of the back instead of intravenously. The treatment protocol depends on the severity of infection. In less severe cases, the dog may be treated for four months with a heartworm preventive to kill any migrating heartworm larvae and to decrease the size of the female worms. Then an injection of melarsomine is given to kill the adult heartworms. Five weeks later, the dog is treated with two more injections of the adulticide. Four months after the treatment, the dog should be tested for heartworms using the antigen test. Some animals may need to undergo a second round of injections if repeat antigen tests remain positive. It is recommended that dogs remain on a monthly heartworm preventive during the treatment. In severe cases, it may be necessary to use the adulticide before the four months of heartworm preventive are given.

Regardless of which drug is used, when the adult heartworms die, they can obstruct blood vessels to the lungs (these are called pulmonary embolisms). If only a small part of the lung is involved, there may be no clinical signs. However, if the vessels to a large portion of the lung or a small area of an already diseased lung are blocked, severe signs may result. These include fever, cough, coughing up

blood, and even heart failure. Because of the risk of these embolisms, any dog being treated with an adulticide must be kept very quiet during treatment and for at least 4 weeks thereafter.

Prevention

Heartworm is almost totally preventable. A number of heartworm preventives for dogs are on the market. Some heartworm preventives, or drugs that are combined with them, will control other parasites. Preventive products should be used year-round, even in areas where mosquitoes only occur seasonally. Even if doses are accidentally skipped, preventive products are still beneficial to the pet. If given consistently over a 12-month period, it's possible to actually stop worms from developing into adults. Also, monthly heartworm preventives have activity against intestinal parasites, which inadvertently infect three to six million people every year. These preventives protect pets and people.

RAGofAZ recommends keeping the dog on heartworm preventive and having him/her tested once a year. RAGofAZ starts every rescued Golden testing negative for heartworm with one dose of Heartgard.