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**What Every Dog Owner Should Know About Heartworms**

Heartworms are a serious and potentially deadly condition that affects dogs, but the good news is that it’s easy to prevent. Understanding what heartworms are, how they spread, and the steps you can take to protect your dog will help ensure your furry friend stays healthy and happy. Here’s everything you need to know about heartworms and how to keep them away from your dog.

Heartworms are long, thin parasites that live in a dog’s heart, lungs, and blood vessels. These worms can grow up to 12 inches long and cause severe damage to a dog’s heart and lungs. A dog with heartworms may develop heart failure, lung disease, or other serious health problems. In some cases, heartworms can be fatal if left untreated. Dogs of all ages, breeds, and sizes can get heartworms, so it’s important to take steps to protect your pet.

Heartworms are spread by mosquitoes. When a mosquito bites an infected animal, it picks up tiny heartworm larvae from the animal’s bloodstream. When that mosquito bites your dog, it can pass the larvae into your dog’s body. Over time, the larvae grow into adult heartworms, which can cause serious health problems. Since mosquitoes are found in most areas and can easily get indoors, even dogs that don’t spend much time outside are at risk. Heartworms are more common in warmer climates, but cases have been reported in all 50 states.

Heartworm disease can develop slowly, so your dog might not show symptoms right away. However, as the infection progresses, you may notice signs such as a persistent cough, fatigue (especially after exercise), difficulty breathing, decreased appetite or weight loss, or a swollen belly caused by fluid build-up. If you notice these symptoms, contact your veterinarian immediately. Heartworm disease is easier to treat when caught early.

The best way to protect your dog from heartworms is to prevent them in the first place. Heartworm disease is expensive and difficult to treat, but it’s easy to avoid with a regular preventative schedule. Heartworm prevention comes in several forms, including monthly chewable tablets, topical medications, and injections that last six to twelve months. These medications kill the heartworm larvae before they can grow into adults, keeping your dog safe. Even if your dog is on preventative medication, it’s important to have them tested for heartworms once a year. No medication is 100% effective, and regular testing ensures that any infection is caught early.

Giving your dog their heartworm preventative on time every month is crucial. Missing a dose, even by a few days, could put your dog at risk. Many owners find it helpful to set a reminder on their phone or mark the date on a calendar to ensure they never forget. If you accidentally miss a dose, call your vet for advice. They may recommend giving the missed dose immediately and continuing as normal, but testing may be needed to ensure your dog hasn’t been exposed.

Before starting your dog on a heartworm preventative, your vet will need to test them to make sure they’re not already infected. This is usually done with a simple blood test during your dog’s annual checkup. Dogs that are already infected with heartworms need treatment before starting preventatives, as giving the medication to a dog with adult heartworms can cause dangerous complications.

If your dog tests positive for heartworms, treatment is available, but it can be costly and take several months. Treatment typically involves a series of injections to kill the adult worms, as well as medications to control inflammation and prevent new infections. During treatment, your dog will need to stay calm and avoid strenuous activity, as exercise can worsen the damage caused by the worms. While treatment can save your dog’s life, it’s far easier—and cheaper—to prevent heartworms with regular medication.

Heartworm prevention is much less expensive than treatment and is widely available. Your vet can recommend the best option for your dog based on their size, age, and lifestyle. If you are having trouble affording or accessing a veterinarian, talk to your local animal shelter about low-cost options available in your community. Many animal shelters or low-cost veterinary clinics also offer heartworm preventatives at reduced prices.

Heartworms are dangerous but preventable. Regular use of heartworm prevention medication is the best way to protect your dog. Since mosquitoes spread heartworms, even indoor dogs are at risk. Yearly testing is essential, even if your dog is on prevention, to ensure they stay healthy. Prevention is affordable and easy compared to the cost and difficulty of treating heartworm disease. By staying on top of your dog’s preventative care and testing schedule, you can keep them safe from heartworms and enjoy many happy, healthy years together.