

Attention: Heartworm Alert!

Heartworm Disease in Arizona: In the past few years heartworm disease has been found in many parts of the state. In 2001-2002, 735 cases were diagnosed in Arizona, 492 of them in Maricopa County. Canine heartworm disease is a serious and potentially fatal disease of dogs that is spread by mosquitoes. When a mosquito bites an infected dog, it ingests blood that may contain microscopic forms of heartworm called microfilaria. The microfilaria develop in the mosquito, and if the carrier mosquito bites your dog and transmits the larvae, they develop into adult heartworms.

How Does It Affect My Dog? When an infected mosquito bites your dog, the larvae enter the bloodstream and develop into adult heartworms. The adult heartworms live in the right side of the heart and in the surrounding blood vessels. This impairs circulation of the blood, which causes damage to the dog's heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. Unfortunately a great deal of damage can occur before any outward signs of the disease are noticed. Signs that owners observe include frequent coughing, labored breathing, listlessness, exercise intolerance, and weight loss. Without treatment the disease can lead to congestive heart failure and death.

Can I Test My Dog For Heartworms? The best way to detect heartworm disease in its early stages is through a simple blood test. The test will detect heartworm disease after the dog has been infected for six months. Dogs younger than six months are not tested because the disease has not had time to develop. Some cases may be more difficult to diagnose and x-rays or other laboratory tests may be needed to confirm infection.

Can Infected Dogs Be Treated? Most dogs can be treated if the disease is detected early enough. Treatment involves killing the adult worms with a series of carefully administered injections. Reactions to the drug can occur, and there is a risk involved in treating a dog for heartworms. After all the adult heartworms have been killed your animal can then be placed on heartworm preventatives.

Prevention Is Best! The best prevention is to kill the larvae with medication before they develop into adults. Preventative medications are given monthly through an easily administered tablet. Medication is not given to dogs older than six months who have not been tested for the disease.

Does My Dog Take This Forever? In most areas of Arizona and throughout the United States, the extent of the disease makes it necessary to keep your dog on preventative all year round for the rest of it's life.