

TAKING ON TOUGH QUESTIONS



AMERICAN HEARTWORM SOCIETY™
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FAQs ABOUT HEARTWORM DIAGNOSIS, PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT

Q My client's 3-year-old hunting dog was just diagnosed with adult heartworms. How do I set the boundaries on exercise restriction—especially for a young, active dog like this one? – Dr. P.



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THE SHORT ANSWER

Even relatively healthy dogs can experience serious complications like PTE from adulticide treatment, especially in the 4 weeks that immediately follow melarsomine administration.

A When a dog appears otherwise healthy, the owner may find it hard to understand that enforcing a rest and recovery period while the dog undergoes adulticide therapy is still necessary. Gaining understanding with this directive prior to beginning treatment is paramount; failure to limit the dog's activity can greatly increase the chances of post-adulticide complications.

Explain the risks. Pulmonary thromboembolism (PTE) is an expected consequence of melarsomine administration. As adult worms die, they are absorbed by the bloodstream before being cleared from the body. In the process, the debris from dead and dying worms can create emboli that clog the dog's arteries and lungs. Thoracic radiographs can help the clinician assess the patient's cardiopulmonary status, especially in the case of severe pulmonary arterial obstruction. However, owners should know that even asymptomatic dogs can experience post-treatment complications.

Choose the right words. If your client successfully controls their dog's activity, it will greatly minimize the risk of serious complications during adulticide treatment. This is a case where choosing the right words

to counsel clients is critical. Veterinary behaviorist Dr. Deb Horwitz says that words like "confine" or "restrict"—especially when you're talking about weeks vs. days—can sound quite onerous to the owner. Describing it as "the rest the dog needs for recovery," sounds more positive and proactive.

Educate on enrichment. It's important to balance the physical and behavioral health needs of the heartworm patient, so you don't make the treatment and recovery worse than the disease. As physical restrictions are imposed for the dog, mental stimulation can and should be ramped up. (Visit the AHS Youtube page at youtube.com/user/americanheartworm for more tips on communicating with owners of dogs undergoing treatment.)

Take a tiered approach. While keeping the dog calm and quiet throughout treatment is vital, the degree of appropriate activity varies (see Figure 1). Note that Phase 2 of the therapy—the 4 weeks that follow the melarsomine injections—is when most worm death occurs and the risk of complications is the greatest.

Figure 1

Phase 1 (Prior to melarsomine treatment)		Phase 2 (0-4 weeks post-injection)		Phase 3 (5-8 weeks post-injection)	
<p>DO:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short leash walks • In-kennel or on-leash training • Provide in-kennel enrichment • On-leash socialization with dogs & humans 	<p>DON'T:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in playgroups • Go for a run or long, vigorous walk • Leave unsupervised when not confined to kennel or small room 	<p>DO:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit walks to potty breaks only • Continue training, enrichment & socialization • Consider anxiolytics • Monitor for coughing, panting, difficulty breathing 	<p>DON'T:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in playgroups • Leave unsupervised when not confined to kennel or small room 	<p>DO:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slowly re-introduce leash walks • Continue training, enrichment & socialization • Allow short periods of unsupervised or unconfined activities • Monitor for signs of clinical disease 	<p>DON'T:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in large or rowdy playgroups • Go for a run or long, vigorous walk