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American Heartworm Society Announces Updated Guidelines on Management of Feline Heartworm Disease

Holly Springs, NC—Persistent underdiagnosis and undermanagement of heartworm disease in cats, along with more robust data on prevention, testing and treatment, recently led the American Heartworm Society (AHS) to update their Feline Heartworm Guidelines for veterinarians. The update, completed after a thorough scientific review by experts from the fields of parasitology, cardiology, and clinical practice, includes updated advice on heartworm screening, mosquito control and treatment options for heartworm-positive cats. The guidelines can be found on the AHS website at heartwormsociety.org/guidelines.

Routine heartworm screening now recommended for cats

According to the AHS, the four primary reasons to test cats are (1) to help establish a diagnosis when a veterinarian finds clinical evidence of infection; (2) to monitor the status of cats already diagnosed with heartworms; (3) to establish a baseline prior to beginning a heartworm prevention product; and (4) to better understand the relative risk of feline heartworm in a practice area.

“While dogs are routinely screened for heartworms during annual check-ups, testing in cats has primarily been limited to cases when a veterinarian suspects heartworm infection based on a cat’s clinical signs,” said AHS President Jennifer Rizzo, DVM. “With so few cats tested, it has been difficult for veterinarians to get a handle on the true incidence of heartworm in cats—even though cats are at risk wherever heartworm infection occurs in dogs.”

According to the revised guidelines, cats should be screened using both antigen and antibody tests. The AHS further recommends that veterinarians conduct antigen tests with heat-treated serum—a point of difference from their canine guidelines. The purpose: to dissociate potential antigen-antibody immune complexes and obtain the most accurate results. The guidelines note that while antigen-antibody complexes occur in both canine and feline blood samples, a so-called negative antigen test result in feline serum is up to 12 times more likely to be converted to a positive result with heat treatment than canine serum. Meanwhile, the AHS also recommends that antibody testing—the second component of heartworm screening in cats—be conducted with the Heska (an Antech company) antibody test*, due to its greater sensitivity over other tests.

Other diagnostic techniques outlined in the revised guidelines include radiography, echocardiography and, most recently, point of care ultrasound.

“There’s no question that testing limitations have been a significant factor in heartworm underdiagnosis in cats,” Dr. Rizzo acknowledged. “By using the most accurate screening procedures and screening cats on a more routine basis, we hope to greatly improve the veterinary profession’s understanding of the disease *and* initiate steps to best manage affected patients.”

Heartworm prevention guidelines expand to include vector control
The AHS continues to recommend that all cats be on year-round heartworm prevention with a macrocyclic lactone product. The revised guidelines now address the importance of vector control as well as preventive products, noting that the large numbers of unprotected cats make multimodal vector-control programs especially important. While vector control in dogs is typically geared toward the use of mosquito repellents that can be applied to dogs, the guidelines note that the goal of vector control in cats should be to reduce the risk of mosquitoes in the environment rather than on cats themselves.

Heartworm treatment guidelines gain more specificity
With more routine testing, AHS experts expect the numbers of cats diagnosed with heartworms to increase. “While no approved adulticide treatment is available for cats, our guidelines include updated recommendations for managing infected cats,” said Dr. Rizzo, adding that treatment objectives are to relieve the clinical signs of disease and, in the case of adult infections, to prevent sudden death of the cat.

Several classes of medications, along with dosages, are described in the revised guidelines, from anti-inflammatory drugs to leukotriene modifiers to antibiotics. Techniques for surgical removal of adult heartworms are also described.

“As an organization dedicated to reducing the incidence of heartworm disease and its impact on pets, the AHS has long been concerned about the underdiagnosis and undermanagement of heartworm disease in cats,” said Dr. Rizzo. “Fortunately, we now have scientific information that supports a more proactive approach to heartworm diagnosis, as well as greater specificity in prevention and treatment approaches.”

The AHS Feline Guidelines were previously revised in 2015. The current update was spearheaded by a committee of AHS board members, including Tom Nelson, DVM; John McCall, PhD; Andrew Moorhead, DVM, MS, PhD, DACVM (Parasitology); Lindsay Starkey, DVM, PhD, DACVM (Parasitology); Mark Cousins, DVM, DABVP (Feline Medicine) and Marisa Ames, DVM, DACVIM (Cardiology).

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*Veterinarians can access this test by calling 970-493-7272 and asking for test #805514.