

Q. Does my dog need a heartworm preventive?

A. Yes. One of the easiest and most important steps you can take to protect your dog's health is to give year-round heartworm prevention. Without prevention, heartworms can grow up to a foot long or more (really!) inside your pet's heart, lungs and arteries and cause permanent damage.

Here's what you need to know:

- 1. If you have a puppy, start him or her on prevention early.** It's best to put a puppy on heartworm prevention as early as possible. The American Heartworm Society (AHS) recommends starting prevention no later than 8 weeks of age. Heartworm medications used in puppies protect them against other parasites, too, so the product your veterinarian recommends will probably depend on what parasites are common in your area, as well what best fits your budget.
- 2. Older dogs might need a heartworm test first.** If you adopt your dog when he or she is 6 months of age or older—and you don't know whether he or she has been on heartworm prevention—your veterinarian will recommend a heartworm test before starting prevention and another test half a year later. Dogs don't test positive until six months after becoming infected, so two tests are typically needed.
- 3. Track your pup's weight.** The dosage of a heartworm preventive is based on a dog's weight, which means you will most likely need to change dosages as your puppy grows—and change them frequently if you have a large-breed dog that is growing fast. Once your dog is full-grown, you will also want to keep track of any weight changes to make sure the dose is right.
- 4. Stay on schedule.** Some heartworm preventives are monthly, while others are given every six or 12 months. If you miss a dose, or you're late giving it, your dog could become infected. Nobody likes to admit to being forgetful, but being honest with your veterinarian is essential. Depending on the length of the lapse and the relative risk of infection where you live, your veterinarian may want to test your dog for heartworms before his or her next official check-up. The earlier an infection is caught, the better your dog's prognosis. Every month treatment is delayed allows heartworms to grow inside your dog and cause more damage.
- 5. Get a heartworm test every year.** Dogs on heartworm prevention need a heartworm test every year. Even if you're diligent about remembering your pet's preventive every month (and hopefully you are), it's possible for your dog to spit out a chewable medication or to rub off a topical preventive, putting him or her at risk. In addition, the possibility of resistance to heartworm preventives—while rare—is real and can be documented through annual testing. Testing is easy—only three drops of blood are needed for a heartworm test and the test itself can be done during your dog's annual veterinary check-up.

