

Q • My cat has tested positive for heartworms. What can I do?

A. News like this can be a shock to a cat owner, especially if you didn't realize that cats—like dogs—get heartworm disease. Heartworm infection is serious in both species, but unfortunately far fewer cats than dogs are protected.

Here's what you need to know:

Heartworms are spread by mosquitoes. Just like dogs, cats become infected when they are bitten by mosquitoes carrying infective heartworm larvae. BUT...

Heartworm disease is a different disease in cats than dogs. Unlike their canine counterparts, cats are not ideal hosts for heartworms. The cat's immune system eliminates the vast majority of immature heartworms before the parasites reach maturity. The death of these immature worms causes respiratory damage and symptoms such as coughing, wheezing and breathing difficulty. Meanwhile, cats can also harbor adult worms, and when these adult worms die, it can lead to an acute respiratory disease syndrome as well as sudden death.

One distinction that really sets cats apart from dogs is that just one or two adult worms can cause serious disease—even death—in cats. Dogs typically harbor many more heartworms when infected, and it's not uncommon for them to have 30 or more worms living in their hearts, lungs and arteries. And while heartworms can live inside a dog for 5-7 years, in cats the lifespan is only 2-3 years.

Cats can be trickier to diagnose than dogs. Veterinarians use a blood test called an antigen test to diagnose heartworm in dogs. While antigen tests can also be used in cats, the results aren't nearly as reliable. When heartworm infection is suspected, veterinarians typically use a combination of antigen, heat-treated antigen and antibody tests along with X-rays to confirm the diagnosis.



There's no cure for heartworms in cats, just prevention. It's a tough truth, but there is *no FDA-approved treatment* for feline heartworm infections. The medication used to kill adult heartworms in dogs simply isn't safe for use in cats. That's why giving heartworm preventives, which are both safe and effective, is especially important for cats. And there's a bonus: heartworm preventives also protect cats from other parasites besides heartworms.

If your cat gets heartworm infection, he or she *can* be helped. While there's no cure for heartworm infection in cats, it doesn't mean your cat's situation is hopeless. It's possible your cat's immune system will spontaneously clear the worms. Meanwhile, your veterinarian can prescribe medications to help reduce the inflammation that results from infection. He or she will also want to monitor your cat for signs of worsening disease, so you should expect to visit the veterinary office more frequently.

If you haven't given your cat heartworm preventives before, you should start now to prevent new infections from developing. And if you have other cats in your household, make sure they're on prevention, too.

The bottom line: Yes, heartworm disease is serious in cats. Partnering with your veterinarian and providing good home care are the keys to keeping your cat as healthy as possible.

