

Q • My dog has tested positive for heartworms. *Now what?*

A. This is the kind of “positive” news no pet parent wants to hear. But take heart. The good news is that most dogs with heartworms can be successfully treated.

Here’s what you should expect:

- 1. The diagnosis must be confirmed.** Yes, the heartworm test was positive. But your veterinarian needs more information before starting treatment to (1) be sure that treatment is necessary AND (2) to determine if “baby” heartworms—along with adult heartworms—are present. Depending on your dog’s age and symptoms, other diagnostic tests may be needed to determine the best plan of attack.
- 2. Your dog’s disease will be stabilized.** Ultimately, heartworm treatment involves giving your dog what’s known as an “adulticide” medication that eliminates the adult worms living in the blood vessels, lungs and heart. But before the adulticide is administered, your dog will undergo a “pre-treatment” phase with medications that kill immature heartworms AND make the adulticide regime safer and more effective. Other supportive medications might be recommended by your veterinarian based on your dog’s symptoms and findings from diagnostic tests.
- 3. Adulticide therapy will begin.** A drug called melarsomine is the only medication that is FDA-approved to kill adult heartworms. This medication is given as a series of injections in your veterinarian’s office and will require repeat visits. Adulticide therapy should not be confused with management plans that consist of giving a heartworm preventive over an extended period of time instead of melarsomine. The American Heartworm Society does not recommend this approach, which is sometimes called “slow kill,” because it can take up to a year or even longer for the adult heartworms to die. During this time, heartworm disease continues to progress and
- 4. You’ll be asked to restrict your dog’s exercise.** While activity is normally great for your dog’s health, it’s not safe for him or her to run and chase while undergoing heartworm treatment. Physical exertion has been proven to increase complications from heartworm treatment, and there’s a direct correlation between the level of activity and the severity of disease. This period of rest and recovery should start at diagnosis and continue until 6 to 8 weeks following your dog’s last melarsomine injection.
- 5. Keep your dog heartworm-free.** Dogs can become reinfected with heartworms following treatment, so keeping your dog on year-round heartworm prevention is a *must*. Fortunately, you have a choice of heartworm prevention options, from monthly chewable and topical medications to annual and semi-annual injections. Discuss the options with your veterinarians and find the prevention strategy that’s best for you *and* your dog. You want to be sure that heartworm infection is a one-time event. ■



cause serious damage to your dog’s blood vessels and organs—damage that can be irreversible.

