



Heartworm Outreach: Client Education in the Age of Covid-19

Educating clients without face-to-face communication has emerged as a new challenge in veterinary practices today. Whether a client has a new puppy or is the seasoned owner of a senior cat, understanding the need for year-round, on-time heartworm prevention and annual testing can mean life or death for pets.

Q. How can veterinarians stay engaged with pet owners if we're not seeing them face-to-face?

A. With full appointment schedules and curbside-only service, it can be harder than ever to deliver effective client education. Yes, we have phone calls, FaceTime and Zoom, but the time we can devote to these may be limited.

In our practice, we have dedicated a cell phone to sending and receiving texts from clients with appointments. This phone also serves as a client education portal for:

- Texting clients prior to visits. If it's a wellness visit, I can send articles about heartworm disease, vaccines and nutrition.
- Demystifying appointments. During visits, we send photos of the pet with the technician or veterinarian to clients so owners can see what's happening while they sit outside in the car. I also send lab reports, including heartworm test results. Finally, we text owners a link to our preferred online pharmacy so they can have refills sent to their homes.
- Sending follow-up reading. In addition to sending home handouts, we direct clients to relevant website articles or YouTube videos.

Q. I'm not as comfortable as I should be with social media. Any tips?

A. While our clinic has had a Facebook page for years, we've stepped up our social efforts during the pandemic. We post pictures of patients and our staff every day (with the owners' permission, of course). It allows clients to see how we interact with their pets and what our treatment area looks like.

Social networking helps keep our services, hours and processes in front of the public, so we follow other



Texting photos of pets with technicians and veterinarians during visits can help demystify appointments for clients who are in their cars vs. the exam room.

community Facebook pages, including those of the Chamber of Commerce, dog clubs, breed clubs, doggie daycare and grooming facilities. We typically alternate clinic and community posts with educational posts. We also invite owners to follow our page during clinic visits, include messages on receipts and ask clients to tag us when they post about bringing their pets to the clinic.

Q. I want to make sure my clients stay compliant. Any ideas for heartworm reminders?

A. Email or text message can be used to remind clients about heartworm testing, refills and on-time administration of preventives. We recently added a coupon to our website homepage that allows clients to receive discounts on heartworm preventives ordered through our preferred online pharmacy. Clients really appreciate being able to save money and keep up with their pet's care without needing to leave the house.

When pets come in for exams, we invite owners to submit orders and refills through our website while they're still in the car waiting for their pet. The online pharmacy gives them a choice of ordering six or 12 months of automatic refills, which has actually resulted in better compliance than we had with in-clinic refills.

Client education needs to evolve, but it doesn't have to become a casualty of the pandemic. By strengthening some strategies and adopting new ones, our clinic outreach has actually become more effective than it was before.



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