

Have a Pet? Don't 'Fall' for the Myth of Seasonal Heartworm Prevention

(StatePoint) The world's deadliest animal isn't a lion, tiger, bear or venomous snake. It's a tiny but bloodthirsty insect: the mosquito. And the assumption of many pet lovers that mosquitoes are just a seasonal threat may be putting their four-legged family members at risk.

Mosquitoes harbor and transmit a variety of life-threatening diseases to people and their pets, thus earning the "world's deadliest" designation. One of the most serious and prevalent mosquito-borne diseases in pets is heartworm disease—a disease characterized by foot-long worms that obstruct the lungs and arteries of pets, causing issues that range from coughing and vomiting to serious breathing problems and heart failure.

Pitfalls of "Seasonal" Heartworm Prevention

While heartworms can be easily prevented with medications prescribed by veterinarians, the American Heartworm Society (AHS) notes that more than a million pets in the United States have heartworms. A recent survey conducted by the organization revealed a leading reason: many pet owners stop giving their pets heartworm preventives during the fall and winter, unknowingly putting their pets at risk. In fact, while more than 9 in 10 veterinarians surveyed by the AHS reported they recommend year-round heartworm prevention, 7 in 10 cited the failure of pet owners to follow this recommendation as a leading cause of heartworm infection.

The mistake many owners make is to assume the risk of mosquitoes transmitting heartworms ends with the change of season. Following are three reasons this thinking is flawed:

- **Weather patterns are warming and unpredictable.** In recent years, winter temperatures have reached the 60s—and occasionally even the 70s—in cold-weather regions like the Midwest and Northeast. While mosquitoes are dormant during cold weather, they can become active



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again on warm days.

- **Mosquitoes come indoors and continue to feed on pets.** Like us, these insects know to come in from the cold. They often congregate near doorways or in garages, waiting for their chance to sneak inside. Once in your house, it's possible for female mosquitoes—which feed on blood to reproduce—to survive for up to a month or more.

- **Urban and suburban areas foster the development of protected "heat islands,"** where temperatures can be up to 20 degrees warmer than the surrounding countryside. Buildings, vehicles and concrete surfaces trap heat during the day, keeping temperatures well above normal. This allows mosquitoes to stay active and dangerous well into the cool-weather months.

Rather than asking pet owners to guess when the world's deadliest animal is no longer "in season," the American Heartworm Society recommends giving pets heartworm prevention year-round. It's a simple step that can make a life-and-death difference.