

Heartworm Disease and Treatment

Unfortunately, many dogs we save from the South are what we call heartworm positive, meaning that there are worms living in their hearts and lungs because previous owners did not provide them prevention such as Heartgard, Iverhart, Interceptor, etc.

Heartworms are transmitted by mosquitos, so when an infected mosquito bites a dog it has the potential to transmit these deadly parasites. If prevention is given, the parasites do not have time to develop to adults; but if not, they require injections in order to kill the adult worms.

Heartworm disease is not directly contagious to other animals; it does require a mosquito. A heartworm positive dog can live alongside other animals, though we do recommend other animals in the house be on prevention. Humans cannot get heartworm.

Treatment is greater than 90% effective and most dogs recover well, however it is extremely important to follow the instructions for medications and exercise restrictions to minimize the risk of any complications. Leaving the worms without treatment will cause long-term damage and even death.

When your dog arrives, it will be put on a daily medication called doxycycline for 30 days to help make the worms easier to kill and also disrupt the ability of heartworms to transmit to the mosquito therefore breaking the infection cycle. Your dog is also given its monthly dose of heartworm prevention to ensure it does not get re-infected. During these 30 days it is okay to leash walk, but the American Heartworm Society does recommend exercise restriction; i.e., no dog parks/daycare, hard running, etc. The key is really to not get their heart rate up or get the dog panting. After the doxycycline your dog will be treated with two injections of medication 24 hours apart at our vets. This happens 2-6 weeks after it is done with the doxycycline, depending on our veterinarian availability. For 6-8 weeks after the injections the exercise restrictions are more strict and even more important. No running/jumping/playing, leash walks outside to potty only. Any notice of lethargy, strong cough, not eating could be early signs of complications and those should be attended to ASAP by your veterinarian.

We know it is no fun to keep your new dog quiet—many of us have had foster dogs go through heartworm treatment—but it is in the best interest of the dog and minimizing complications. After the 6-8 weeks of exercise restriction, your dog can go back to normal exercise and do whatever it wants! Having heartworm treated once does not mean dogs can never get it again, so keeping your dog on monthly prevention all year around for the rest of its life is extremely important.

Timeline for treatment:

Day zero: Dog arrives and starts doxycycline for 30 days and dose of heartworm prevention is given.

Day 30: Dog is due for another dose of heartworm prevention this day and every 30 days for the rest of its life. (Products like Heartgard are preventative products for heartworm disease.)

Days 45-90: Dog will get two injections 24 hours apart at our veterinary partners.

6-8 weeks after injections: Maintain strict exercise restriction.

6-12 months after treatment: See your veterinarian for a follow-up heartworm test.

Note: If your dog is tested within six months of treatment, it will more than likely show positive still. This does not mean that the treatment did not work, but rather that the immune response the body had created has not had enough time to disappear.