

# Heartworm Disease in Cats: A Pet Parent's Guide

## What Is Heartworm Disease?

Heartworm disease is a potentially fatal infection caused by a parasite, *Dirofilaria immitis*, which is spread by mosquitoes. This condition can seriously damage a cat's heart, lungs, blood vessels, and other organs.

While cats aren't ideal hosts, **there are no medications approved for cats to eliminate heartworms**, so it's critical to keep your feline on year-round prevention.

## Did You Know?

- Only around 25% of heartworms reach adulthood in cats.
- If infected, some cats may never show any symptoms, making it difficult to diagnose—especially compared to dogs.

To get an accurate diagnosis, vets may need to perform a physical exam and several tests, including blood work, chest X-rays, and ultrasounds.

## Common Signs of Heartworm Disease in Cats

Some cats may never show symptoms. When cats do show signs of heartworm infection, veterinarians usually see the following symptoms:

- Lethargy
- Coughing
- Decreased appetite
- Weight loss
- Inability to exercise
- Vomiting
- Difficulty breathing
- Increased breathing
- Open-mouth breathing
- Neurologic abnormalities (difficulty walking, seizures)
- Heart murmur



# Stages of Heartworm

Once an infected mosquito bites an unprotected cat, the American Heartworm Society divides the progression of the disease into two stages:

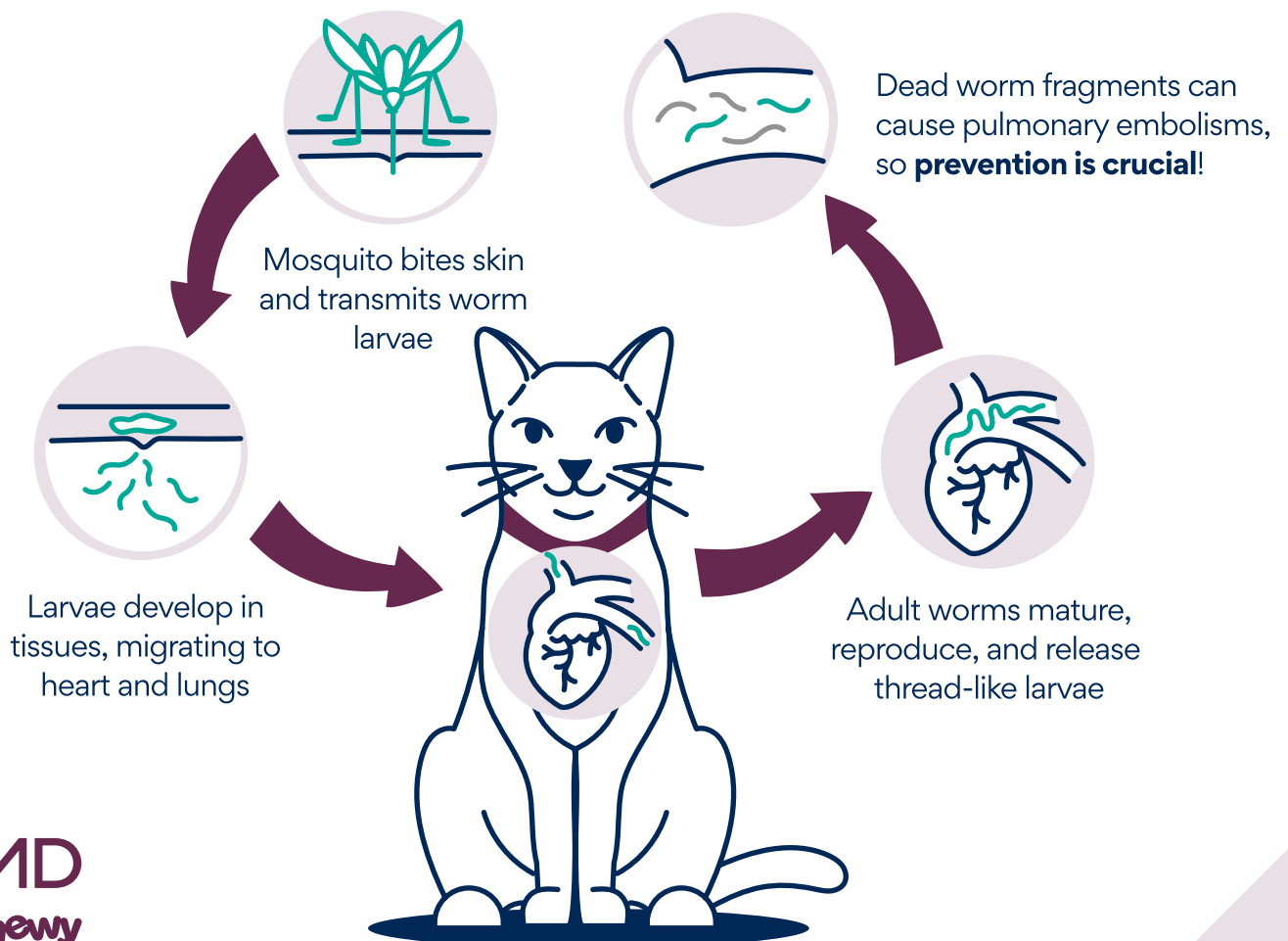
## Stage 1

This stage occurs when immature worms arrive within the arteries of the lungs of a cat and some die. This causes a quick and severe reaction as the cat's organs respond to the parasite.

This reaction, called acute inflammatory process heartworm-associated respiratory disease (HARD), is often misdiagnosed as asthma or other common respiratory diseases.

## Stage 2

The second stage occurs when some adult heartworms die, triggering a further inflammatory response in a cat's lungs. They can also break into pieces and cause blockages, or embolisms, that prevent blood flow to the lungs. Both are often fatal.



# Symptoms & Treatment

---

## How Is Heartworm Treated in Cats?

Treating heartworm disease is more difficult to treat in cats than in dogs. The American Heartworm Society does not recommend using therapies that kill adult heartworms in cats.

Asymptomatic cats may have the option of being monitored over time for a spontaneous cure—meaning the cat’s immune system will naturally clear the heartworm infection without treatment.

For cats showing signs of infection, vets typically recommend medications like ivermectin, prednisolone, or doxycycline.

## Cost of Treatment vs. Prevention

Treatment for heartworm disease in cats can cost a pet parent thousands of dollars—ongoing care, diagnostic testing, and surgery can get very expensive.

By comparison, the cost of heartworm preventatives for cats is typically under \$100 per year.

## My Cat Doesn’t Go Outside. Do They Still Need to Be on Heartworm Prevention?

Yes! All cats should be on heartworm prevention year-round. Even in cold weather, mosquitoes can survive and spread heartworms to your cat.

Even if a cat never goes outside, mosquitoes can still come into your home through doors, torn screens, and open windows.

Protecting your cat from this harmful parasite is key to being a responsible pet parent.