

Heartworm Disease in Dogs: A Pet Parent's Guide

What Is Heartworm Disease?

Heartworm disease is caused by a parasite, *Dirofilaria immitis*, which is spread by mosquitoes and can grow to be over a foot long. These worms can clog a dog's heart and lungs and spread throughout the body, causing organ damage and failure.

Heartworm disease in dogs is painful, progressive, and potentially fatal, so **it's critical to keep your four-legged friend on year-round preventative medication.**

Did You Know?

- Mosquitoes are the only carrier for transmission of heartworm in dogs—dogs can't spread heartworm to each other.
- It only takes one infected mosquito to cause heartworm disease.
- In addition to heartworm prevention, a mosquito repellent can be used through a dog's collar. Check with your veterinarian before using additional repellents.

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 Dogs

The severity of heartworm infection in a dog depends on the symptoms present. Signs of heartworm in dogs typically involve the heart and lungs. Veterinarians usually see the following symptoms:

- Cough
- Lethargy
- Exercise intolerance
- Collapse
- Weight loss
- Difficulty breathing
- Excessive panting
- Right-sided heart failure
- Fluid in the abdomen (a condition called ascites)



Symptoms & Treatment

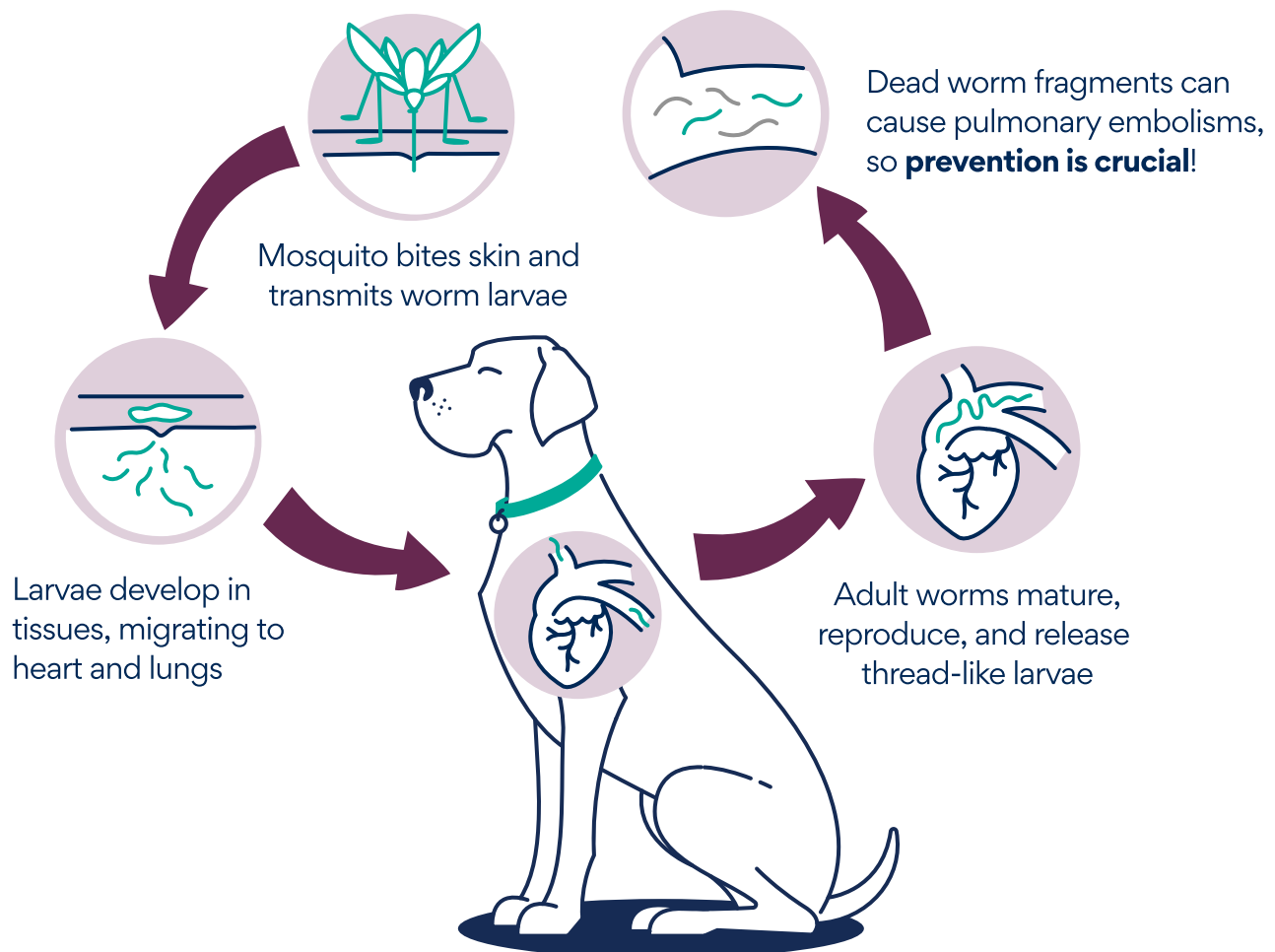
Stages of Heartworm

When a mosquito bites and takes blood from an infected host (such as a dog, fox, wolf, or coyote), they ingest young heartworms (microfilariae). Inside the mosquito, the microfilariae undergo three stages of larval development (L1, L2, L3).

When the same mosquito bites another dog, the L3 is deposited onto the dog's skin, migrating into the dog's body. It then develops into L4.

As an L5, it moves throughout a dog's tissues and bloodstream. It ends up in the dog's heart, where it takes up residence as an adult. This entire process usually takes about four months to complete.

A few months later, around 7 months of age, the adult females become sexually mature, mate, and produce more heartworms.



FAQ

How Is Heartworm Disease in Dogs Treated?

Infected dogs should have their activities restricted. Exercise can increase the risk of heartworms dislodging and causing clots in other parts of the body.

Veterinarians may prescribe certain medications, such as steroids, antibiotics, and heartworm preventatives.

An injection will be given to your dog 60, 90, and 91 days after diagnosis. This injection is designed to kill adult heartworms and is usually given in the lower back. Since this can be painful, pain medications for your dog are typically sent home during these visits.

Nine months after treatment is completed, the affected dog will be tested for heartworms to ensure that treatment has been successful.



I Live in an Area With Cold Weather. Does My Dog Still Need to Be on Heartworm Prevention?

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

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

Cost of Treatment vs. Prevention

Treatment for heartworm disease in dogs 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 dogs is typically under \$100 per year.