

Heartworm Disease Not Just a Mosquito Bite

By Lyndsey Larson, VMD

It is springtime in the Rockies, and that means heartworm season is upon us. Heartworm is a parasite that is transmitted from mosquitoes to dogs and occasionally to cats. Many of us will be enjoying a variety of summer outdoor activities with our pets.



As we venture out with our furry friends, remember that it's possible not only for you but also for your dog to be bitten by those pesky mosquitoes. For us a mosquito bite is merely an annoyance, but for our dogs these bites could have life-threatening consequences.

When certain mosquitoes bite your dog, they can inject microscopic heartworm larvae into the skin. The larvae grow and migrate through your dog over a six-month period until they reach adulthood and reside in the heart and lungs. Once there, the worms can cause serious and potential life-threatening problems, including heart failure, severe lung disease blood clots and occasionally blockage of major blood vessels. Clinical signs of heartworm disease may include exercise intolerance, cough and/or shortness of breath.

In Colorado, dogs are susceptible to heartworm-carrying mosquitoes all season but winter. Heartworm can be prevented through the administration of a highly palatable, once-monthly, oral medication. The medication can be given as a six-month regimen from June through November or year round. One reason some owners opt for the year-round regimen is that they may travel to areas where heartworm is present all year.

Another reason is that it protects against many common intestinal parasites. It is strongly recommended that a blood test be performed annually and prior to starting your dog on the preventative medication. Your veterinarian will be happy to discuss all the options with you.

If your dog is unfortunate and becomes infected with heartworm disease, treatment is very effective but has the potential for many, often-serious side effects. In light of the severity of the disease and potential for complications associated with treatment, prevention is by far the best thing you can do for your dog.

Enjoy all that the Colorado summer has to offer, but make sure your furry companion is protected against this potentially serious disease.