

### **How significant is my pet's risk for heartworm infection?**

Many factors must be considered, even if heartworms do not seem to be a problem in your local area. Your community may have a greater incidence of heartworm disease than you realize—or you may unknowingly travel with your pet to an area where heartworms are more common. Heartworm disease is also spreading to new regions of the country each year. Stray and neglected dogs and certain wildlife such as coyotes, wolves, and foxes can be carriers of heartworms. Mosquitoes blown great distances by the wind and the relocation of infected pets to previously uninfected areas also contribute to the spread of heartworm disease (this happened following Hurricane Katrina when 250,000 pets, many of them infected with heartworms, were “adopted” and shipped throughout the continent).

The fact is that heartworm disease has been diagnosed in 5 Canadian Provinces (MB, ON [403 cases in 2015-2016], QC, NB, NS) as well as in all 50 states, and risk factors are impossible to predict. Multiple variables, from climate variations to the presence of wildlife carriers, cause rates of infections to vary dramatically from year to year—even within communities. And because infected mosquitoes can come inside, both outdoor and indoor pets are at risk.

For these reasons, the Heartworm Society recommends that you “think 12:” (1) get your pet tested every 12 months for heartworm and (2) give your pet heartworm preventive 12 months a year. [Note from SVS: the recommendation for 12 month preventive use holds true for the southern USA. In Ontario, where we can have long periods of cold weather, the risk can be considered to be lower. We do believe strongly in annual testing, however.]

### **What do I need to know about heartworm testing?**

Heartworm disease is a serious, progressive disease. The earlier it is detected, the better the chances the pet will recover. There are few, if any, early signs of disease when a dog or cat is infected with heartworms, so detecting their presence with a heartworm test administered by a veterinarian is important. The test requires just a small blood sample from your pet, and it works by detecting the presence of heartworm proteins. Some veterinarians process heartworm tests right in their hospitals while others send the samples to a diagnostic laboratory. In either case, results are obtained quickly. If your pet tests positive, further tests may be ordered.

### **When should my pet be tested?**

All dogs should be tested annually for heartworm infection, and this can usually be done during a routine visit for preventive care. Following are guidelines on testing and timing:

- Puppies under 7 months of age can be started on heartworm prevention without a heartworm test (it takes at least 6 months for a dog to test positive after it has been infected), but should be tested yearly to ensure they are heartworm-free.
- Adult dogs over 7 months of age and previously not on a preventive need to be tested prior to starting heartworm prevention. They, too, need to be tested 12 months later and annually thereafter.
- If there has been a lapse in prevention (one or more late or missed doses), dogs should be tested immediately, then tested again six months later and annually after that.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Annual testing is necessary, even when dogs are on heartworm prevention year-round, to ensure that the prevention program is working. Heartworm medications are highly effective, but dogs can still become infected. If you miss just one dose of a monthly medication—or give it late—it can leave your dog unprotected. Even if you give the medication as recommended, your dog may spit out or vomit a heartworm pill—or rub off a topical medication. Heartworm preventives are highly effective, but not 100 percent effective. If you don't get your dog tested, you won't know your dog needs treatment.