

Heartworm Testing and Prevention Information

What is heartworm disease?

Heartworm disease is a serious and potentially fatal disease in pets. It is caused by foot-long worms (heartworms) that live in the heart, lungs, and associated blood vessels of affected pets, causing severe lung disease, heart failure and damage to other organs in the body. Heartworm disease can affect dogs, cats, and ferrets.

How does an animal get heartworm disease?

Heartworm disease is transmitted by mosquitos. The mosquitos deposit baby heartworm parasites into the bloodstream of the dog or cat during a mosquito bite. After about 7 months, these juveniles will mature into adult heartworms that live in the heart and lungs.

Is my dog at risk?

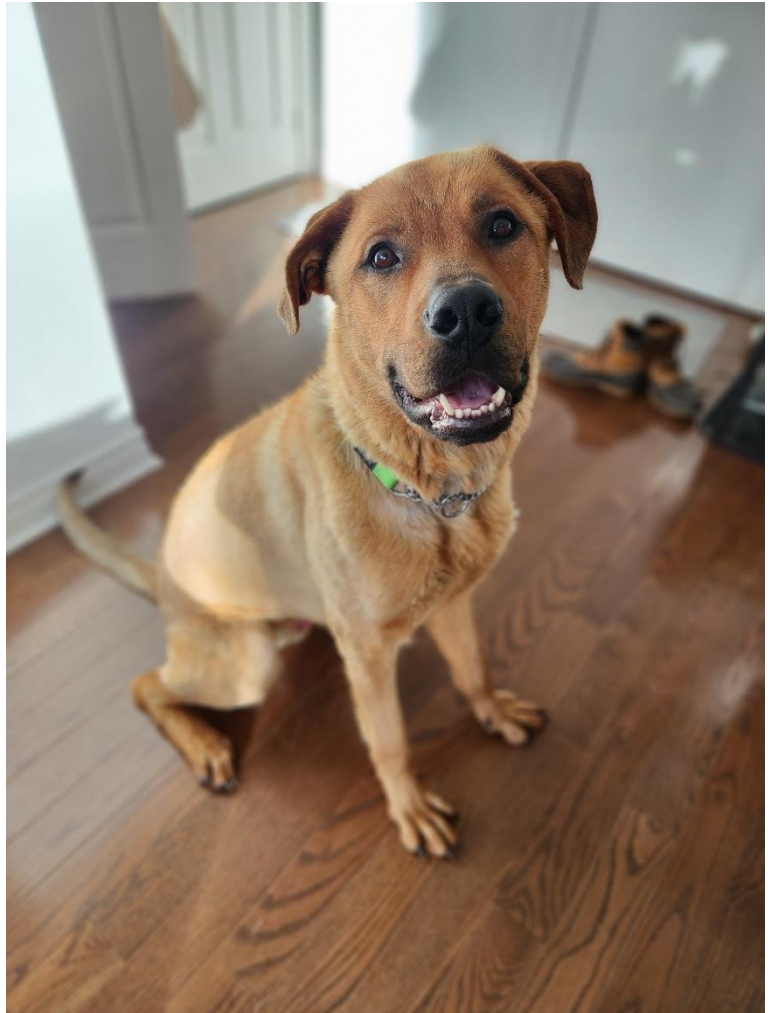
Any dog who spends time outside in areas where there are mosquitos could be at risk of heartworm disease. Dogs who travel outside of Toronto, spend time in the warmer climates such as the United States, or spend a lot of time outdoors may be at increased risk. Historically there have been low levels of heartworm disease within the city of Toronto. However, with warmer weather lasting longer and more global movement of dogs, heartworm disease is increasing across North America.

How can heartworm disease be prevented?

The best way to protect your dog from heartworm is by using a heartworm prevention medication throughout the heartworm season. In Southern Ontario, this is June 1 through November 1. If your pet routinely travels to warmer climates such as the United States, prevention may be needed year-round. Heartworm prevention is usually a pill or a topical solution that is used once monthly throughout heartworm season. Many of these products also prevent against other parasites such as fleas, ticks, or intestinal worms. Starting these prevention products earlier in the spring may be needed for the flea and tick prevention benefits.

What is heartworm testing?

A heartworm test is a quick blood test that checks for the presence of adult heartworms in a dog. Often this test is run in combination with a test for exposure to tick-borne diseases such as Lyme, Anaplasma, and Ehrlichia. This combination test is called a 4DX. This is the test that is used at Toronto Humane Society Public Veterinary Services.



Silas, a Toronto Humane Society dog, who received heartworm treatment.



When is a heartworm test needed?

A heartworm test is strongly recommended each year in the spring before beginning heartworm prevention for the year. If a dog is bitten by a mosquito carrying heartworm disease, the test will not be positive until 7 months after this bite. For this reason, a heartworm test is checking for exposure from the previous heartworm season. Identifying heartworm disease early is important so that treatment can begin before there are serious complications from the disease.

Does my puppy need a test before starting prevention?

Puppies under 7 months old do not need a heartworm test. This is because of the lifecycle of the heartworm parasite. It can take up to 7 months from the time of an infection for the test to show up as positive, so testing dogs less than 7 months will not give a reliable result.

Does my cat need a test?

We do not routinely test cats for heartworm disease as the blood test is not as reliable in cats as in dogs. Cats are only tested if they have symptoms of heartworm disease, such as coughing.

Does my cat need heartworm prevention?

Cats who go outdoors should be on heartworm prevention from April 1 to November 1 just like dogs, as they can be exposed to mosquito bites as well. Indoor cats are at lower risk of heartworm infection, but it is not impossible for mosquitos to come into the home.

Where can I get more information?

Please visit the [American Heartworm Society Heartworm Basics for Pet Owners](#) webpage.

