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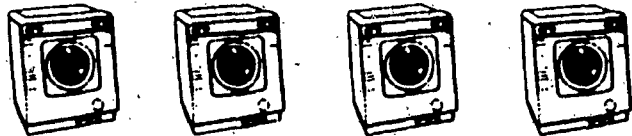
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Now is the time to check dog for heartworm

By Michele Liberti-Lansing
GUILDERLAND — The mosquito season will soon be upon us. If you're a dog owner, now is the time to have your pet checked for heartworm infection, whether the test was done last year or not.

It is crucial that dogs be rechecked each and every year — and just as important that preventive medication you may have left over from last year not be administered until the dog undergoes a simple blood test that detects heartworm disease — the consequences could be extremely dangerous should you fail to heed this advice, according to Dr. Edward Becker of The Animal Hospital in Guilderland.

A simple blood test can detect the presence of baby heartworms (microfilariae) in a dog's bloodstream, however the test should be performed no later than April, as preventive medication is given during the mosquito season, in this area from May 1 through Dec. 1 for the daily medication, and June 1 through Dec. 1 for the monthly preventative.

Becker says blood tests for heartworm disease are "quite accurate, with an efficacy of around the mid 80s to very high 90s."

Should an untested dog, who has already been infected with heartworms, be given the preventive medication, Becker said, "There's a potential risk that if a dog has heartworms in its heart that are adults, and you give the preventative, that can kill the worms in the heart very quickly. The (dying) worms would cause a mechanical obstructive problem in the heart and the pulmonary artery in the lungs — they're literally being pumped (into the pulmonary artery) and they can actually plug up those vessels — that's why it's so dangerous."

Becker said permanent damage could be done to the dog's lungs, primarily, and secondarily, to the heart. The major symptoms of heartworm disease are lethargy and frequent coughing.

Transmission

Heartworm disease is spread by mosquitoes. The Heartworm Committee of the Capital District Veterinary Society describes the transmission process: "When a mosquito bites and draws blood containing microfilariae from an infected dog, it becomes infected with baby heartworms. After 14 to 21 days, the microfilariae in the mosquito become infective larvae and are passed through the mouth parts into a healthy dog when the animal is bitten by an infected mosquito."

"In the newly-infected dog, the heartworm larvae burrow under the skin and develop in the tissues for 90 to 120 days, then penetrate into blood vessels and move to the heart where they mature into adult heartworms that live in the heart and adjacent large blood vessels. They are often 10 to 14 inches long. The adult female heartworm then gives birth to a new crop of baby heartworms that circulate freely in the dog's bloodstream, waiting for a free ride to another dog via the mosquito. Prevention of heartworm disease is based upon breaking this cycle."

If no microfilariae are discovered, preventive medication is recommended to safeguard dogs against developing heartworm disease. Becker advocates putting dogs on the medication if they are outside for any length of time and especially for those animals living near bodies of water.

Although Becker said heartworm disease has been a problem in this area for the last 15 years, he said the incidence has decreased; however, that is no

reason not to have your animal checked and given the medication, he warns. Becker said in his practice he sees between three and nine cases per year. He said the disease has been "pretty evenly spread throughout our area — with the exception that wherever you have water, you tend to have more mosquitoes, therefore more heartworm."

With the advent of Heartgard (the popular, preferred preventive medication for over four years), incidence of heartworm disease has decreased, Becker said. He said the medication is very effective. "I've personally never diagnosed (the disease) in a dog that's been on Heartgard. But I used to see it with the old heartworm preventative."

Asked if it's possible for a dog to become infected with heartworms while taking Heartgard, Becker said, "Yes, it's possible, that's why it's so important to test them. If your dog is unlucky enough to be that one in many thousand that still got heartworm disease on the preventative, by that time the adults have developed in the heart, and giving (the medication) again that spring could really do damage."

Treatment

"There's a very standard protocol for treating heartworm," said Becker. "It hasn't changed much over the last four or five years. It's very effective. What we're giving (dogs) is an arsenical compound that very slowly kills the heartworms. We also give them supportive therapy, like aspirin to prevent clotting, and antibiotics."

The treatment (injection period) itself takes 48 hours, said Becker, and animals in his practice are hospitalized for about four or five days. Preliminary testing is done to make sure the animal's liver and kidneys are functioning properly and after treatment ceases, the animal is kept an additional day for observation. "It's a very serious disease — when we diagnose it (through the blood test that detects microfilariae) there are already adult (heartworms) in the heart, otherwise there wouldn't be babies in the blood."

Becker said a new preventive medication, called Interceptor, came out this year. "There's one advantage to this — if the dog has chronic hookworm." (Hookworm is an intestinal parasite, commonly acquired outdoors in warm weather — bloody diarrhea and weight loss are the chief symptoms.)

Interceptor, given once a month, will prevent both heartworm and hookworm, said Becker.

He continued, "It's important for people to understand that heartworm disease, in my practice anyway, is a low-incidence disease. Dogs are not doomed to getting heartworm if they aren't on the preventative. But I do recommend (the medication) because it's such a devastating disease, particularly for dogs who are outside a lot, being bitten by mosquitoes, or for dogs who travel to other areas where heartworm disease is prevalent. It's well worth the one pill a month."

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