

Mosquito Season



By Dr. Judy Jasek, DVM

*Bellevue Animal Clinic
Englewood, Colorado*

Spring is upon us and with it comes the risk of heartworm disease. Heartworm can be a life-threatening disease in dogs and Denver dogs are no exception. Luckily, it is easily prevented with proper medication and monitoring.

What is heartworm disease?

Heartworm disease is caused by a worm that lives in the blood vessels around the heart. The disease is transmitted when an infected mosquito bites a dog. The mosquito infects that dog with an immature, or larval form of the worm, which then migrates to the heart and lives in the vessels there. Symptoms of heartworm disease can include cough, exercise intolerance and difficulty breathing. The disease can be fatal if large numbers of worms grow in the blood vessels. It is important to remember that newly infected dogs may appear completely normal.

At this stage, the disease can only be detected by doing a blood test. Since mosquitoes are not very common in Colorado, the incidence of heartworm disease is lower here than in other areas of the country. Denver dogs can and do become infected and must be monitored and given preventative medication.

The Prevention Plan

Routine blood testing is always recommended to be sure your dog has not been infected with heartworm disease. This is important even if your dog is on medication. No medicine is 100% effective and testing your dog's blood is the only way to be sure they have not become infected. The frequency of testing depends on your dog's mosquito exposure and if your dog has been on heartworm medication. Your dog should be on prevention during the warmer spring, summer and early fall months when mosquitoes are out. If you have missed any months, your dog should be tested every year. If your dog is given a monthly heartworm preventative during the entire mosquito season (April to November in Colorado), I recommend testing every other year. Testing is more important if you live by, or take your dog to areas where mosquitoes are common such as lakes, ponds or any area where water accumulates.

Heartworm Treatment

What happens if your dog tests positive for heartworm disease? There are different treatment methods depending on the severity of the disease. It will not harm your dog to be on the preventative if he becomes infected – this is actually now an approved method of treating mild infections. For more severe infections, an injectable medication called Immiticide is used. It is very expensive and the risk of adverse effects of treatment is high, especially in advanced cases of heartworm disease. You can expect to spend \$500-\$1000 and your dog may become very ill as the worms die and the body attempts to eliminate them. Imagine many little worm pieces floating through your bloodstream – yuk! Compare this to the cost of prevention and routine testing (approximately \$50-70 per year) and the suffering your pet will avoid – prevention is definitely the way to go.



Photo by Brenda A. Smith