

Points on Pets: Heartworms strike cats, too

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: Our veterinarian has recommended that we treat our cats to prevent heartworms. Although we have had cats for many years, we have never been told that this is important nor have we ever heard of any cat having heartworms. We have always had our dogs on preventive treatments. Are heartworms a new thing in cats? Should indoor cats be treated?

A: Although feline heartworm disease was first reported in 1921, most cat owners are unaware of the extreme dangers of this disease for their pets. The American Heartworm Society and the American Association of Feline Practitioners have recently initiated a campaign to inform cat owners about the dangers of heartworms.

Heartworm disease is not just a disease seen in dogs. Although it makes sense that indoor cats would not likely be at risk for heartworm disease, surveys have demonstrated that more than a quarter of the cats diagnosed with this disease are indoor-only cats.

Heartworm disease is spread among animals by infected mosquitoes. Mosquitoes do occasionally get inside our houses in spite of our efforts to keep doors closed and screens in good repair. Even indoor cats can be exposed to heartworm disease.

Because cats with heartworms usually exhibit signs of respiratory problems, the disease is often mistaken for asthma and other respiratory diseases. It has even been said that the name "heartworm" is a misnomer in cats because more often than the heart, the lungs are affected. The respiratory signs seen with heartworm infections in cats are called heartworm associated respiratory disease, or HARD.

Common signs of HARD in cats include loss of appetite, weight loss, lethargy, seizures, fainting spells, loss of coordination, difficult breathing, coughing and gagging, and vomiting. Some cats with heartworm disease exhibit no external signs.

All cat owners should ask their veterinarians for recommendations regarding the prevention of heartworm disease. As with most diseases, prevention is much less costly than treating the actual disease when diagnosed. Prevention is also much more humane than allowing a valued pet to suffer because of a serious disease that could have been prevented.

Q: We are wondering if veterinarians are trained in chiropractic medicine. A friend recently suggested to us that our horse might benefit from a chiropractic treatment. We are hesitant to ask our veterinarian about this. We do not want him to think that we do not have confidence in what he has prescribed.

A: Although alternative treatment methods such as chiropractic medicine are being used in animals throughout the United States, most of the 28 veterinary colleges do not include these in their curriculums. Veterinarians have varying opinions regarding alternative diagnostic methods and therapies such as chiropractic adjustments, massage therapy, herbal remedies, holistic and homeopathic treatments, and acupuncture.

Veterinarians are rightfully reluctant to try alternative therapies until there is conclusive evidence that they are not harmful and actually help. Of course delaying traditional treatment while alternative methods are administered can put animals at great risk. Most veterinarians are willing to accept new treatment methods if given solid evidence that they are beneficial. You should ask your veterinarian about alternative treatments for your animals. He will likely not be offended and glad to explain his treatment approach more completely for you.

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