



Animal Clinic of Michigan City

Feline Heartworm Disease

Less than 5% of cats receive regular heartworm prevention. In contrast, almost 29% of cats have been exposed, or infected, with heartworms. Heartworms are a very preventable infection with year-round prevention.

The greatest population density of infected cats are the Gulf of Mexico, the Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi River Valleys, and along Lake Michigan. Heartworms are spread from animal to animal by way of the mosquito. A cat becomes infected when it is bitten by a mosquito carrying heartworm larvae (babies). The larvae then move into the blood vessels of the lungs where they mature into adults. The adults can live up to 2-3 years in a cat. As few as 3 heartworms are enough to kill a cat.

Both the larvae and the adults cause symptoms in cats. The larvae cause inflammation in the arteries and airways in the lungs. As the worms, both babies and adults, die, more inflammation occurs within the lungs and heart. The inflammation can be severe enough to cause sudden death.

FACTS:

Heartworm disease is not just a canine (dog) disease. Heartworms affect cats often more seriously than dogs and can cause severe lung disease and even sudden death.

It only takes one mosquito to infect a cat. Because mosquitoes can get indoors, all cats are at risk. Even during the winter, mosquitoes can live inside and infect cats. One study showed that 28% of infected cats were inside-only cats. That is why all cats should be on heartworm preventatives.

Heartworm disease is a misnomer, as it mostly affects the lungs and not just the heart. Signs are often similar to bronchitis and asthma. That is why all cats with lung disease should have radiographs (X-rays) to determine the true cause of the symptoms.

Diagnosis of heartworms in cats is more difficult than in dogs. Testing is not as reliable as in dogs and, at this time, can even lead to a false result. Usually radiographs and even a heart ultrasound may be needed along with blood work and a good physical exam.

SIGNS:

Most heartworm infections are asymptomatic (no signs) until permanent damage occurs. One of the most common signs of heartworm infection is **sudden death**. The other signs are vomiting, weight loss, asthma, coughing, anorexia (not eating), difficulty breathing and collapse.

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION:

There is no treatment for cats. At this time the treatment is preventing signs while the heartworms die. At the same time, strict prevention is necessary. Prevention is similar to dogs. Monthly use of **Revolution** or **Interceptor** (the 25-50 lb. size) prevents infection and can help to destroy the larvae. We currently recommend year-round monthly use of one of these products.

