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## **FELINE HEARTWORM DISEASE**

### ***Facts on Heartworm Disease***

*Heartworm disease is a serious and potentially fatal disease in cats. Infections are also seen in dogs and ferrets. While many cats will show no symptoms at all, any infection can have serious consequences if left untreated. Even one heartworm can result in clinical disease, breathing difficulty, or death.*

### ***Symptoms***

*Symptoms can include asthma-like signs, diminished appetite, coughing, listlessness, weight loss, and sudden death. However, during early stages of infection, cats with heartworm disease may show no symptoms.*

### ***Life Cycle - A Complex Chain of Events***

*Heartworm larvae are transmitted to cats in the same way they are transmitted to dogs, through the bite wound of a heartworm infected mosquito. These larvae develop into mature adults which travel to the heart and pulmonary vessels. At maturity (about 6 months) the worms begin to shed proteins called antigens into the animal's bloodstream. The cat's immune system builds antibodies against these foreign substances. Your veterinarian may advise testing your cat to see if heartworm antigen or antibodies are present.*

*Mature heartworms reproduce by releasing offspring called microfilaria, which can be picked up by another feeding mosquito. Inside the mosquito, this organism develops into a larval stage and the cycle is completed. (Note: Since microfilaria are found more readily in the dog than the cat, dogs are the most common source of infection for mosquitoes.) Often cat owners will assume that their indoor cats are safe from infection. This is not true. Both indoor and outdoor cats are susceptible to infection.*

### ***Detection***

*The most accurate method to detect exposure is through a blood test for circulating heartworm antigens and/or antibodies.*

*Your veterinarian may choose to use additional blood tests, x-rays, or ultrasound to help confirm infections and determine a course of treatment for your cat.*

### ***Treatment and Prevention***

*Adult heartworms in dogs can be killed with a series of injections or in an emergency, removed through surgery. However, since treatment of adult heartworm infections in the cat can be life-threatening, prevention is encouraged.*

*Prevention programs are available from your veterinarian. Monthly medication destroys the early stages of the parasite soon after it enters your pet. Body weight and geographic location are considerations in determining an effective prevention schedule. In this area, year-round medication is used. Your veterinarian can discuss the best program for your pet.*