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HEARTWORM DISEASE & PREVENTION-What's the big deal?

Why does my dog have to have a heartworm test before I give heartworm prevention?

In many heartworm infections there is a particular stage of the heartworm called microfilariae, which circulate throughout the dog's bloodstream. These tiny worms are only visible under a microscope. This stage is the baby heartworm produced by adult female heartworms living in your dog's heart and large pulmonary arteries. These microfilariae are easily killed by many of today's heartworm preventatives. When large numbers of these "baby heartworms" die, they can clog up the small vessels in major organs of your dog's body, like the kidneys. Their death can also trigger abnormal clot formation in your dog's circulatory system that leads to a condition called DIC, or Disseminated Intravascular Coagulation, which means your dog's body can have thousands of "strokes" in every major organ from loss of circulation caused by the tiny clots triggered by the microfilariae. This can lead to a painful death.

Why was my puppy or cat started on heartworm prevention without a test? Isn't this dangerous?

It takes a minimum of 6 months for an adult female heartworm to develop and begin producing the dangerous microfilariae in dogs. But dogs can get infected anytime they are bitten by a mosquito carrying the heartworm disease. So puppies are started on prevention as soon as they start going to the vet, usually at 6-8 weeks of age.

Cats are not as good a host for the heartworms and so many of the life stages do not develop like they do in dogs. Cats rarely have enough adult female heartworms present to produce microfilariae. It is so uncommon, in fact, that heartworm testing before starting prevention is not required in cats.

Why do I have to have a prescription from my veterinarian to get heartworm prevention?

Because the potential exists for a dog or cat to have a fatal reaction to the medication if they are infected with some stages of the heartworm, and the medication is used to treat internal parasites, there is a legal requirement in this country for a veterinarian to examine your pet, run any needed tests and educate you, the pet owner, in how to best use this medicine to protect your pet's health and safety. All drugs that have been shown to be safe and effective for the prevention of heartworm disease in dogs and cats are prescription only medications in the United States, just like medications a human physician might prescribe to treat or prevent the development of disease conditions for people, such as blood pressure medicine, drugs to control cholesterol levels or antibiotics for certain infections. Use of these drugs in any way other than intended could cause harm to the patient, and so is illegal.

What about the heartworm prevention I can buy without a prescription? There are no heartworm preventatives legally available in the USA without a veterinary prescription. Products that you may have found a source for without a prescription are 1) illegal 2) may not be safe, effective or 3) may not even contain the medicine you believe they do and are paying for.