

Waterloo West Animal Hospital

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Heartworm Disease in Dogs, Cats and Ferrets

Heartworm is an insidious disease that has spread to virtually all parts of North America since the early 1970s. It is spread only by mosquitoes; thus, areas heavily populated by these insects tend to have a greater incidence of heartworm disease.

Heartworm can strike **dogs, ferrets and cats**. As its name implies, heartworm lives in the blood of a **dog's, ferret's** or **cat's** heart and adjacent blood vessels. The adult heartworms living in the heart produce offspring, called microfilariae, which circulate in the infected animal's blood.

When a mosquito "bites" an infected pet, it sucks out blood containing the microfilariae. After about two weeks in the mosquito, the microfilariae become infective larvae. This step is necessary for the transmission of heartworm. When the mosquito bites another pet, the infective larvae are transmitted.

Veterinary research has resulted in medications and procedures that have improved the treatment of **canine** heartworm disease but there is **no treatment licensed for ferrets or cats**. The outcome is usually **fatal** for both **ferrets and cats**.

Highly effective diagnostic testing and preventive medications have been developed in recent years. It is necessary to have a heartworm test prior to using a preventive. Severe or fatal reactions may occur if preventives are given to pets with heartworm disease, or may create diagnostic confusion at a later date. A small amount of blood is all that's necessary for a preliminary heartworm screening test that is very accurate in detecting the presence of heartworm. In many regions, this may be the only test needed before starting a preventive program.

Heartworm disease symptoms:

Dogs: Difficulty breathing, coughing, tires easily, listlessness, weight loss, rough hair coat. In many cases, there are advanced symptoms. Some dogs do not appear to have symptoms in the early stages as others do. If not detected and controlled with proper treatment, heartworm can lead to congestive heart failure and **death**.

In **cats**, heartworms actually cause more damage to the respiratory system than to the heart. That is why in **cats**, we now call the disease "**Heartworm Associated Respiratory Disease**" or "HARD". Immature worms get to the heart and then pass into the blood vessels going to in the lungs. Here, most of them die and cause sudden [inflammation](#). Some go on to become mature heartworms. When they die, they also set off [acute](#) inflammation. **Cats:** Coughing, difficulty breathing, listlessness, loss of appetite, weight loss, vomiting, rapid heart rate, fainting, blindness, collapse, convulsions, sudden **death**

A **ferret** with heartworms will seem tired all the time, may have a [chronic](#) cough, and becomes very short of breath if he/she is active for even a few minutes. Fluid builds up in the abdomen because of the failing heart and blocked blood vessels. The disease is rapidly **progressive and fatal**. [Cardiomyopathy](#), another heart condition of **ferrets**, can cause identical symptoms.

As a safeguard, many veterinarians recommend annual screening tests even for dogs, ferrets and cats that are on heartworm preventives.