



# It Pays to Test: Why Your Dog Needs an Annual Heartworm Check-up

Spring, summer, winter or fall—your pets need year-round prevention to keep them free of deadly heartworms and other parasites. While an annual heartworm check-up with your veterinarian is one of the best moves you can make as a responsible pet owner, it's helpful to understand why heartworm testing and examinations are important.

## **My dog was just tested for heartworm a year ago. Why does he need a test again so soon?**

Your dog should have a heartworm test once a year to determine if he became infected with heartworms during the previous season. It takes months before a dog with heartworm will test positive on a heartworm test, so testing annually—usually at the time the prescription for his heartworm medication is being renewed—makes sense. As with many diseases, the earlier heartworm can be diagnosed, the better the chances he will recover. If heartworm disease in a dog goes undetected and untreated, the worms can cause progressive and potentially fatal damage to his arteries, heart and lungs.

## **If my dog is on continuous heartworm prevention, why does he need to be tested?**

That's a logical question if you're a responsible owner who keeps your dog on heartworm prevention year-round. The reason for annual testing of dogs in this case is to ensure his prevention program is working. Heartworm medications are highly effective, but dogs can still become infected.

Why? A common reason is simple forgetfulness. Missing just one dose of a monthly medication—or giving it late—can leave a dog unprotected. Even if you do everything right and on time, it's no guarantee. Some

dogs spit out their heartworm pills when their owners aren't looking. Others may vomit their pills or rub off a topical heartworm medication. Whatever the cause of missing or delaying a dose, any of these mishaps can put your dog at risk of heartworm infection.

## **I have several cats as well as a dog. Do my cats need heartworm protection too?**

Like dogs, cats get heartworm disease. And while cats are not as easily infected as dogs, it only takes one or two heartworms to make a cat very sick. That's why the American Heartworm Society recommends year-round protection for both dogs and cats.

Because heartworm disease in cats may or may not involve infection with adult worms, the diagnosis can be challenging. Veterinarians typically run heartworm blood tests on cats before putting them on medication the first time, but later rely on procedures such as chest x-ray or ultrasound to confirm diagnoses.

Remember, the best offense against heartworm disease is a good defense. Follow AHS recommendations and Think 12—give heartworm preventives 12 months a year and test your dog every 12 months.

