

# Feline Heartworm Disease



## What is feline heartworm disease?

Heartworm disease is caused by long slender worms that can reach up to 12 inches in length and are transmitted by mosquitoes. The adult worms live in the right side of the heart and the blood vessels in the lungs. Microfilaria (microscopic immature forms) are produced by adult worms and circulate in the blood. It can take only one mosquito bite to infect your pet. Heartworms primarily affect dogs (the natural host), but infection in cats can occur and the disease is spreading.

## How does feline heartworm disease differ from the disease in dogs?

- The cat has a smaller number of adult worms (typically one to three) and adult worms have a shorter lifespan in cats (2-3 years).
- Cats commonly do not have circulating microfilaria or have very low numbers that are difficult to detect.
- The therapy used to treat heartworm disease in dogs cannot be used in cats.
- Cats may develop a condition known as 'HARD' which stands for Heartworm Associated Respiratory Disease.
- HARD results from changes consistent with heartworm disease (even in the absence of adult heartworms) in the blood vessels, airways and lungs of cats. These changes are thought to be due to immature forms of the parasite.
- HARD can cause coughing, wheezing and difficulty breathing.

## Is my cat at risk for heartworm infection or disease?

- Cats that go outside are at higher risk for infection. However, indoor cats are also susceptible.
- Heartworm infection rates in cats are thought to be roughly 5-20 percent of those seen in dogs.
- In some studies as many as 30 percent of heartworm infected cats were characterized by their owners as strictly indoors.
- Heartworm infection may exceed the prevalence of feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) in comparable populations.
- There are over 70 species of mosquitoes that can transmit heartworm disease, some of which are typically found indoors despite protective screening.

## What are the signs of heartworm disease in cats?

Signs of this disease vary widely and can include:

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Difficulty breathing
- Vomiting
- Lethargy or collapse
- Weight loss or fluid accumulating in the abdomen
- Staggering or other neurologic signs

If you notice any of these signs, your cat needs to see your Banfield veterinarian immediately. Unfortunately, sudden death is possible in feline heartworm disease.

## How is feline heartworm disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis of heartworm disease is much harder in the cat than in the dog. There are multiple reasons for this: fewer adult worms, no immature forms in the blood, variable disease incidence and inconsistent clinical signs.

- Multiple available tests can have false negative results.
- Testing options include blood tests and X-rays of the chest, although results may be difficult to interpret. In some cases, your veterinarian may refer you to a cardiologist for an ultrasound study of your cat's heart.

## How is feline heartworm disease treated and prevented?

Because there is no current safe treatment for cats and the disease may be severe (and in some cases, fatal) it is strongly recommended to consistently use heartworm preventive medications to reduce your cat's risk of exposure and infection.

If a cat develops heartworm disease, treatment is usually supportive, and may consist of anti-inflammatories, heartworm preventive and antibiotics.

The American Heartworm Society (<https://www.heartwormsociety.org/>) recommends to “Think 12” (preventive 12 months a year and heartworm testing every 12 months).

There are two different types of prevention that can be used in cats:

- An oral preventive that you give once a month
- A topical preventive that you apply once a month

Your Banfield medical team can partner with you in taking the best care of your cat by recommending the preventive that works best for your pet and lifestyle.

Keep in mind that the Special Care Plan for cats includes yearly heartworm testing, and an Optimum Wellness Plan® (OWP) option can be added to almost any feline wellness plan to include heartworm preventive.

