

Pet talk: Heartworms in cats

Heartworms, which are spread by mosquitoes, can cause serious health complications in pets. Although heartworms are more commonly diagnosed in dogs, cats are also at risk for this disease.

Megan Arroyo, a veterinary student at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, explained how heartworms can harm our feline friends.

"The adult worms like to live in the right side of the heart and in the pulmonary artery, which is the blood vessel that supplies blood to the lungs," Arroyo said. "Adult heartworms can cause chronic inflammation that can cause permanent changes to the heart, and even heart failure."

These symptoms, however, most commonly happen in dogs. Cats' immune systems are better at fending off the worms before they become adults. It takes approximately six months for heartworms to become an adult in a new host, according to the American Heartworm Society.

However, fighting off heartworms can cause inflammation, which can lead to an immune reaction in cats. This syndrome, called Heartworm Associated Respiratory Disease, is associated with significant inflammation and permanent damage to the lungs, Arroyo said.

To protect your cat, you should give your pet preventative medication against heartworms, even if your cat primarily resides indoors.

"As much as we hate it, mosquitoes definitely do get in the house, and it only takes one bite from one heartworm-infected

mosquito for a cat or dog to get heartworms," Arroyo said. "Heartworm disease in cats can cause irreversible lung damage, coughing, difficulty breathing, weight loss, and even sudden death. Why wouldn't you choose to protect your beloved cat from this easily preventable disease?"

Prevention, Arroyo said, is key in protecting cats against heartworms because the treatments

available for dogs are toxic to cats.

"If your cat has heartworms, all you can do is prevent further infection and manage symptoms," Arroyo said. "Prevention truly is the best and only medicine for heartworms in cats. No cat parent should skip out on protecting their cat against heartworms."

After all, kitty hearts deserve

just as much love and protection as their canine counterparts, Arroyo said.

Pet Talk is a service of the College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, Texas A&M University. Stories can be viewed on the Web at vetmed.tamu.edu/pettalk. Suggestions for future topics may be directed to editor@cvm.tamu.edu.

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