

ANIMAL CARE AWARENESS

What is a Heartworm and Why Should You Care?

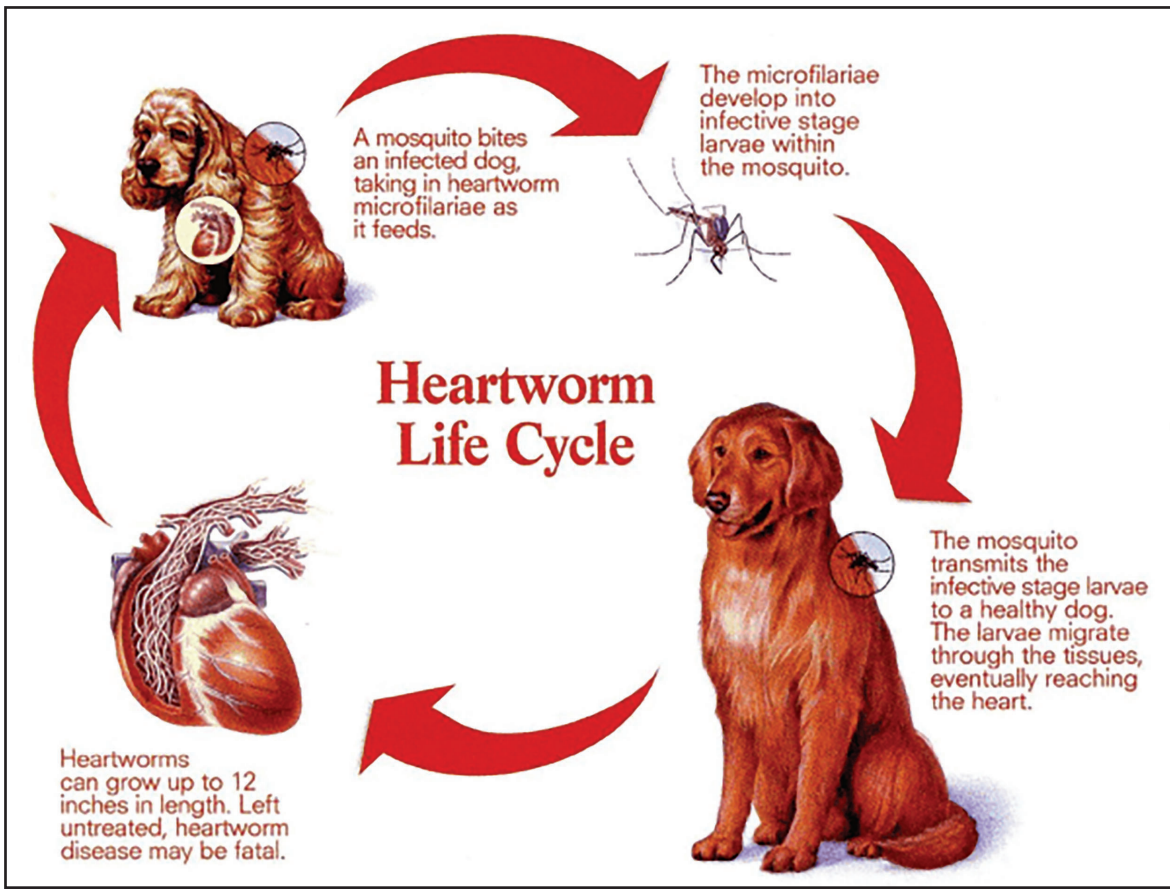


Opinion



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Mary-Anne is a volunteer on assignment with Animals Fiji as part of the Australian Volunteers Program, an Australian Government Initiative.



CONTACT:

If you are worried about your pet's health, make an appointment with your Veterinary Clinic.

Animals Fiji helps animals all around Fiji, with clinics in Savusavu, Labasa, Nadi and Lautoka and they also hold outreach clinics in other areas.

If you want to support Animals Fiji in their work or to find out more about Animals Fiji's services, simply contact their:

- Savusavu Clinic on (+679) 998 6253
- or Nadi Clinic on (+679) 993 6647
- or visit their website at www.animalsfiji.org.

Duffy the dog was only two years old when he showed symptoms of heartworm and could not be saved. Karl Smith, Duffy's owner, recalled, "he was more than a dog, he was so intelligent, so... human-like, and I loved him." Emotion flooded his voice as he remembered his best friend.

Duffy was a beautiful black and tan Doberman that Karl had as a puppy. Duffy liked nothing better than when Karl started his quad bike to round up some sheep or check on his cattle at his property near Savusavu in Fiji's Northern Division.

Duffy would prick up his ears and bound after Karl until he was in front of the bike and leading the way. Karl recalls how graceful he looked when he was in full stride. "He looked like a racehorse or a well-oiled machine working perfectly," he remembers.

Karl first noticed something wrong when Duffy ran less enthusiastically behind the bike, not in front.

He was puffing a lot to keep up and then lying down longer afterwards. He also noticed that Duffy would cough after a run and even when he was lying down.

Karl took Duffy to see the medical team at Animals Fiji Savusavu Clinic where he was assisted by Wendy Kane, the North Manager & Veterinary Nurse, and the news was not good.

Wendy suspected that Duffy had heartworm due to his clinical signs and conducted a heartworm test, which revealed that the condition had already progressed to an advanced stage. Because Duffy had been so active, it was hard to notice early.

Unfortunately, because Duffy was in heart failure from the heartworms, Karl was given a poor prognosis.

The decision to take him home



Duffy enjoying the water and cooling off after helping Karl on the farm.

and try him with medications to help his heart was made. Karl spent the next three days by Duffy's side, till Duffy died in his arms at 1am. Karl was heartbroken.

He had his other three dogs tested and they all had heartworm infestations that could be treated, which Karl immediately did.

What are heartworms and how does my dog get them?

Heartworms live in the heart, the pulmonary artery and the nearby large blood vessels of infected dogs. A dog can only get heartworms when an infected mosquito bites. It cannot be spread by another dog that has heartworm.

However, if another dog has heartworms and a mosquito bites it, the mosquito will transmit the

heartworm larvae. Heartworms are more common in areas with a high mosquito population – which Fiji has.

However, the worm-transmitting mosquitos are widely spread from low to high rainfall areas and from cool to hot regions.

Once the heartworm larvae are in the dog's body, they grow and develop into adult worms.

Female heartworms can grow up to 39 cm long and heartworms live and reproduce for up to 7 years inside a dog's heart!

The best option is to begin heartworm treatment when the dog is six months old.

Preventative treatment may seem like a lot of money or a waste of time if your dog looks and behaves healthy.

However, if the dog gets heartworm, which is a high risk in Fiji, it is much cheaper to prevent than cure.

How do I tell if my dog has heartworm?

Usually, it takes some time for the dog to show symptoms after they are infected by heartworm.

Early symptoms may be a constant cough, especially after exercise and when resting.

They may appear tired, weak, and less active than usual.

When the disease has progressed, other symptoms can include difficulty breathing, especially when doing something active.

They may not be interested in eating and start to lose weight.

The dog's gums may appear pale,

and in some cases, veins in their neck may be more visible due to increased blood pressure as the worms in the heart make the heart work harder to push the blood around the body.

Advanced stages of heartworm infection can lead to heart failure, resulting in the dog fainting or collapsing.

Heartworm will cause death if not treated.

Take your dog immediately to the vet if you have any concerns about its health.

What will the vet do to check whether my dog has heartworm?

Several tests are available for detecting heartworm in dogs.

The antigen test and Microfilaria test are both effective at confirming adult heartworm infections, whereas the PCR test can detect infections at an earlier stage (not available in Fiji).

X-rays may determine how severe the infection is.

No test is 100% foolproof and multiple tests may be needed to confirm accuracy.

Regular testing and preventative medications are essential in regions where heartworm is prevalent – especially in Fiji.

If your dog tests are positive, Animals Fiji will work with you to decide the best treatment and management options for your situation. Early detection and treatment are key to a successful outcome for dogs with heartworm disease.

The most important thing to remember is that if you do start heartworm treatment – it is crucial not to skip any part of the treatment.

The heartworm has many stages in its lifecycle and treatment is needed that will work at every stage to ensure the dogs return to health.

Prevention, early detection and treatment are crucial to protect your pet against heartworm.

While Duffy's story does not have a happy ending (and not all stories do), it reminds us that heartworm isn't easy to detect. Always see your vet if you are concerned about your pet.

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