Get the Worms Out

When deciding which heartworm treatment method to use, you need to take into account the age of your dog, his level of activity, and the severity of the infestation.

There are three conventional methods of treating heartworm: a “fast kill” method using Immiticide (Melarsomine); a “slow kill” method employing Heartgard (Ivermectin); and a surgical method in which the worms are surgically removed from the arteries. In addition, there are so-called holistic treatments such as Paratox Homeopathic or herbal preparations.

Immiticide (fast kill)
Standard treatment with Immiticide consists of giving two injections 24 hours apart, then keeping the dog strictly confined for the next four to six weeks. The injections must be given in a painful location – the muscle close to the dog’s spine in the lumbar (lower back) area. The worms start to die immediately. As their bodies begin to decompose, pieces are “shed” into the dog’s bloodstream and filtered out through the dog’s lungs. This can cause the dog to cough and gag, or lead to a fatal pulmonary embolism.

The dog must be kept confined and his physical exertion kept to an absolute minimum. This generally means that the dog must be kept crated or penned and allowed out to potty only on a leash. Aspirin may be prescribed to lower the risk of blood clots, though this is controversial. Remember that it’s dangerous to combine aspirin with any other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) or with prednisone, and to give it only with food.

Heartgard (slow kill)
The “slow kill” method, which is a newer approach, consists of giving the dog Heartgard on a monthly basis. This heartworm preventative medication has some effect against the adult worms and should gradually eliminate them over a period of one to two years; without treatment, the worms can live up to five years. The earlier the treatment is started after infection, the more quickly it will work to eliminate the adult worms. Note that only Heartgard (Ivermectin) should be used, as Revolution (selamectin) affects far fewer adult worms, and Interceptor (Milbemycin oxime) almost none at all.

Although this method is gentler than the use of Immiticide, the danger from the dying worms is still present, and for a much longer period. A recent Italian study showed that pet dogs (as opposed to the caged laboratory dogs this method had been tested on before) did get pulmonary emboli and some of the dogs died of it. The more active the dog, the higher the risk.

Other heartworm treatments
Surgical methods of heartworm removal require specialized training and instrumentation, and are generally reserved for high-risk patients who would not otherwise be expected to survive. The surgery is followed by one of the standard treatments a few weeks later to kill any remaining worms.

So-called alternative methods to kill heartworms, such as Paratox, are no safer than conventional drugs, since they rely on the exact same action – they kill the larvae/worms in the bloodstream. It is the death of the worms that causes the greatest danger to dogs during treatment.

The decision of how to treat a heartworm-infected dog is not an easy one, and is best made after consulting with your veterinarian regarding the safest method to use for your dog.