

Educating Clients About Feline Heartworm Testing and Prevention

Are you delivering the level of protection that cats need?

By Wendy S. Myers



When our consulting firm called a Florida practice as a phone shopper, the caller told the receptionist she'd found a stray kitten who appeared to be 2-3 months old. "Can you tell me what he needs?" our caller asked. The receptionist explained vaccines, deworming, flea preventatives and feline leukemia testing. When the caller said, "I also have a dog and know you have to protect dogs from heartworms. Do you have to do the same for cats?" The receptionist replied, "No, cats can't get heartworms."

Besides giving misinformation to a phone shopper, this receptionist may be confusing clients. Make sure your entire team, from receptionists to kennel attendants, can speak confidently about feline heartworm disease. Here's where to get training on feline heartworm disease:

- Representatives from laboratory and pharmaceutical companies can offer in-clinic training to build your team's knowledge.
- The American Heartworm Society (AHS) and American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) have partnered to provide information at www.knowheartworms.org.
- IDEXX offers a free online course at www.felinehealthchampion.com. You'll learn how to recognize signs associated with feline heartworm infection, apply consistent guidelines when evaluating feline patients, evaluate care options for heartworm-positive cats and educate staff and clients on feline heartworm disease. Upon course completion, technicians and veterinarians will earn two continuing-education credits.

We have a professional responsibility to offer feline heartworm testing and prevention to every cat owner. Knowledge empowers clients to make the decision that's right for their cats. When introducing a medical service to clients, use benefit statements. Choose talking points that you can communicate with confidence.

How to say it: “Indoor cats are still susceptible. One bite from a mosquito can infect a cat with heartworm, a destructive and potentially deadly disease. I’ve spotted mosquitoes in my home where my indoor exclusive cat lives. Cats can get infected at any age.”

How to say it: “Heartworm disease affects more than the heart. In cats, heartworm disease primarily targets the lungs. It’s often mistaken for asthma or respiratory disease. Symptoms might include coughing, lethargy, weight loss, vomiting not related to eating, seizures and respiratory problems.”



How to say it: “New research shows feline heartworm disease is more prevalent than previously thought. Several studies have found feline heartworm prevalence rates similar to those for feline immunodeficiency virus and feline leukemia – typically 2-3%. In heartworm endemic areas like Florida, infection rates for Heartworm Associated Respiratory Disease are likely to be considerably higher than feline immunodeficiency virus and feline leukemia. Our clinic follows the latest guidelines from the American Heartworm Society. We test cats before beginning preventatives and also test cats with any presenting signs.”

Once your team gets training on feline heartworm disease, begin your client- education campaign. Strive to get more cats on monthly preventatives and set a protocol for feline heartworm testing following AHS guidelines. Measure your compliance and then set goals for improvement.

To calculate your compliance for year-round feline heartworm preventatives, run a report to identify the number of active feline patients age 1 and older. This excludes kittens that may not yet have begun monthly dosing. An active patient is defined as a veterinary visit with in the previous 12 months. Next, run a sales report to find out the number of feline heartworm preventative doses sold. Divide the number of doses by 12 months to determine number of cats on year-round prevention, and then divide that amount by number of active cats. You can apply the same formula to canine patients.

Let’s assume your hospital has 10,000 active feline patients age 1 or older and sold 40,000 doses. Divide 40,000 doses by 12 months, which equals 3,333 cats. To find out the compliance rate, take 3,333 cats divided by 10,000 feline patients. This equals 33% year-round compliance

with each patient getting an average of 4 doses. If your practice has a year-round protocol for protecting cats from feline heartworm disease, you've just identified an opportunity for improvement.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.