

## How to Increase Heartworm Testing

Follow these seven steps to persuade clients to test their dogs and cats for this potentially fatal disease.

By Wendy S. Myers



Last year Dr. Paul Drake treated 47 dogs with heartworms and up to 20 percent of cats tested positive. At Town & Country Veterinary Clinic in Gulfport, Mississippi, staff members educate clients about the importance of year-round preventatives and annual testing. Even during winter, temperatures hover near 68

degrees. The heat and humidity provide an ideal environment for mosquitoes to flourish and infect dogs and cats with heartworms.

“Most of my clients have some experience with heartworms, either through a neighbor’s pet or their own,” Dr. Drake says. “We require a yearly heartworm test to renew a prescription of Heartgard.® For example, a physician wouldn’t renew a woman’s birth-control pills without an annual gynecological exam. We follow the same principle for pets.”

Like Dr. Drake, more veterinarians are encouraging clients to regularly test their pets for heartworms. The highest infection rates in dogs not taking preventatives—up to 45 percent—have been observed within 150 miles of the Atlantic coast from Texas to New Jersey and along the Mississippi River and its major tributaries, according to the American Heartworm Society. Although cats have a lower risk of infection, feline heartworm disease can be fatal. Follow these seven steps to persuade clients to test their pets for this deadly disease.

**1. Set protocols for your practice.** Create written protocols so staff members understand your guidelines for testing, prevention and treatment. “Train your staff on heartworm protocols at least once a year so you can reeducate existing staff and teach new employees,” advises Dr. Peter A. Weinstein, MBA, of Veterinary Practice Consultants in Irvine, California. “Discuss new products and see whether you need to update your protocols.”

The American Heartworm Society recommends testing dogs annually and testing cats before beginning preventatives or if symptoms are present. The timing of tests also is critical. For example, the average prepatent period in dogs is six to seven months and eight months in cats. The interval between infection and the first appearance of microfilariae is the prepatent

period. If your mosquito season ends in September, test the pet in May or June, recommends Dr. David H. Knight, Dipl. ACVIM, former president of the American Heartworm Society and chief of cardiology at the University of Pennsylvania Veterinary Hospital in Philadelphia. “If you’re testing shortly after the exposure period, you will miss any recent infection. By the time you retest, 18 months or more may have elapsed since the infection occurred,” he says. “Wait until the prepatent period expires to test pets.”

Many veterinarians in coastal and southern states advocate yearly testing. At Seaside Animal Care in Calabash, N.C., Dr. Ernest Ward Jr. requires annual heartworm tests. “We don’t give clients a choice,” he says. “As a doctor, it’s my job to evaluate necessity and determine proper protocols. If clients decline a heartworm test, I have them sign a waiver. Clients also negate the 100 percent guarantee by the heartworm preventative manufacturer. I say, ‘You realize you’re forfeiting your insurance policy.’ ”

**2. Train your staff so they can better educate clients.** During a lesson on heartworms, Dr. Drake reviews a 30-page handout on infection risk, testing, preventatives and treatment protocols. Staff members take an exam with 50 questions and must score 75 percent or higher. This ensures everyone educates clients consistently. “I’m not going to settle for mediocre performance,” Dr. Drake says. “Parasites, heartworms, surgery and dermatology are the core of my practice.”

Use guidelines from the American Heartworm Society at [www.heartwormsociety.org](http://www.heartwormsociety.org) to educate staff members and develop your protocols. Also tap diagnostic and pharmaceutical representatives for in-clinic seminars. A vendor can provide lunch for your staff, client-education handouts and product samples for puppy and kitten kits. Ask your diagnostic representative to review how to properly run heartworm tests and interpret results.

**3. Educate clients early.** During the first puppy or kitten visit, talk about heartworm disease and explain that it may be fatal if untreated, Dr. Ward advises. His technician reviews handouts on heartworm disease and a lifetime of preventative care with the client.

Give the puppy or kitten the first dose of heartworm preventative in the exam room. “Every puppy should go home with a six-month supply of preventatives,” Dr. Weinstein says. “Once pets get started, they’re on preventatives indefinitely. The best way to increase compliance is to increase education.”

**4. Give every client a handout.** Create handouts that describe heartworm disease and the risk of infection in your area. Don't just hand the brochure to clients; review it and mark key points with a yellow highlighter.

Vendors and the American Heartworm Society can provide client-education materials. For example, Heska Corporation offers feline heartworm testing consent forms in pads of 50 (800-GO-HESKA). "Offering the client a right to choose makes heartworm disease a more serious issue," says Dr. Rebecca Turnbull, marketing manager of Heska Corporation in Fort Collins, Colorado.

**5. Display maps, posters, specimens and models.** Subtly and constantly expose clients to information about heartworms. Dr. Ward keeps a jar with an infected heart in the exam room. "People say, 'Eeew' when they look at it," he says. "They instantly understand. Plastic models take away the harsh reality of heartworm disease. When you have 14-inch worms floating in a jar, they leave a lasting impression."

Every few months, rotate the posters in your exam rooms. Ask sales representatives about wall hangings on heartworm testing and preventatives. Heska, Merial and the American Heartworm Society offer national maps of heartworm prevalence for veterinarians to hang in their clinics.

**6. Use internal promotions.** Send reminders for heartworm testing as well as preventatives. If a client has a six-month supply of preventatives, send a refill reminder during the fifth month and a testing and refill reminder during the eleventh month, Dr. Weinstein recommends. "Avoid doing all of your heartworm tests in February, March and April because you'll run your staff ragged," he says. "If you test year-round, you can spread business throughout the year." Depending on the timing of the test, you may effectively increase the interval between infection and detection to 18 to 24 months, even if you insist on testing annually, Dr. Knight says.

Also print messages on the bottom of invoices: "Internal parasites can seriously affect your pet's health. Be sure your pet has a fecal and heartworm test every 12 months." Record an announcement for your message-on-hold system. Write articles for your practice newsletter and website.

**7. Track your compliance rate.** Divide the number of dogs in your practice by twice the number of six-month heartworm preventatives you dispensed. For example, you should dispense 2,000 prescriptions for six-month heartworm preventatives for 1,000 dogs. If you require annual testing, you should have 1,000 heartworm tests for 1,000 dogs. “Most veterinarians guess their compliance rate is 80 percent to 90 percent,” Dr. Ward says. “The reality is shocking. Even my clients were only 70 percent compliant in a heartworm endemic area. Clients often miss the second six months of a preventative prescription.”

Just as you track vaccine compliance, add heartworm testing to your practice pulse points. “If you don’t measure it, you can’t monitor it,” Dr. Weinstein says. “Tracking heartworm testing can indicate the effectiveness of your client education.”

### 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](http://www.csvets.com). E-mail Wendy at: [wmyers@csvets.com](mailto:wmyers@csvets.com).