

Ask the Vet



Kelly Barker, DVM

Dr. Barker has received a Bachelors degree in Psychology from Elon University, a Bachelors degree in Animal Science from North Carolina Agriculture and Technical University. She completed her Doctorate of Veterinary Medicine from Mississippi State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 2010. Dr. Barker loves every aspect of medicine. She is a member of the AVMA and the NCVMA.

Dr. Barker followed in her father's footsteps

becoming a second generation veterinarian. She gained years of essential experience assisting her father in his veterinary practice in Eden, NC during high school and college. Dr. Barker has given many lost "babies" a better life, including fifteen cats and a Greyhound, Magie "MooCow" who was adopted her last year in veterinary school. She enjoys spending time with her "babies", friends, and family. She is excited to join the Guilford-Jamestown Veterinary Hospital team!!

Heartworm Disease: Prevention is the Key!

As a practicing veterinarian, I have found there are many infections/disease processes that CANNOT be prevented, however, heartworm disease is one of the few that CAN be prevented. In my quest to provide the best medical/preventative care, I have come to realize that many pet owners do not understand how heartworm disease occurs, therefore fail to understand how easily this disease can be prevented. This article is designed to help pet owners understand the disease process and inform them of the many choices in heartworm prevention today.

How does the heartworm cycle begin?

The formation of heartworms in the lung vessels of your pet takes 7-9 months and begins when a mosquito becomes infected while taking a blood meal from an animal that has already developed heartworm disease (usually domesticated or wild canines). That same mosquito then bites your pet and injects the baby heartworms (larvae) into its body. The larvae travel through the body until they reach the vessels around the lungs. Here they camp out and grow until they take up all the space in the lung vessels and spread out into the heart. At this point, your pet may be showing symptoms of heartworm disease (coughing, exercise intolerance, difficulty breathing when excited). REMEMBER, this takes 7-9 months!!

So why is prevention important?

If your pet is taking his/her monthly heartworm prevention or receiving an injection of ProHeart every 6 months, and gets bit by that pesky little infected mosquito, the prevention will kill all of the larvae that might be circulating at that time. Unfortunately, there is no way to prevent your pet from getting bitten by the mosquito, so it is VERY important to give monthly or biannual heartworm medication. A yearly heartworm test is ALWAYS recommended to make sure your heartworm medication is working properly.

But Doc, my pet lives in the city and doesn't go outside much.

I have lived in many areas of North Carolina, from the coast to the mountains to the city and even rural areas and not any one of these areas were FREE of mosquitos. I will say that there are times of the year that mosquitos are more aggressive, but even in the cooler months, I still hear the mosquitos buzzing in my ears. To those who live in the cities, I have actually seen mosquitos hovering at my door when I open it during all times of the year, just waiting for the opportunity to fly inside in search for a good meal. NO matter where you live or how careful you think you are, that pesky mosquito is waiting for a chance to bite your pet, which makes prevention of heartworm disease VERY important.

Doc, can my kitty get heartworms?

The simple answer is YES, however our feline friends have a unique immune system which usually kills most of the larvae before they spread to the lung vessels. There are always exceptions to every rule, to truly be 100% sure that your kitty will not develop heartworm disease, monthly heartworm prevention is available in their sizes too!! REMEMBER, those pesky little mosquitos love our feline friends as much as our canine friends.

REMEMBER: Heartworm disease is PREVENTABLE

- Those pesky mosquitos are waiting for a chance to bite your pet
- It takes 7-9 months for heartworms to be detected with the test
- YEARLY heartworm testing is RECOMMENDED
- NO geographical area or season is 100% safe from mosquitos

For more information on types of heartworm prevention available for your beloved pet or if you have additional questions about heartworm disease, please contact Guilford-Jamestown Veterinary Hospital or your local veterinary clinic.

See ad for Guilford Jamestown Veterinary Hospital on page 35.