

Sudden Death:

Can it happen to Your Cat?

Many pet owners are familiar with heartworm disease for dogs, but did you know that it is also a serious condition in cats? The symptoms of feline heartworm disease are vague. They can range from a slight cough, vomiting, sluggishness or difficulty breathing to the most common-and most terrifying-indicator, which is sudden death.

The unfortunate-but-frequent-first sign that a cat is infected with heartworm disease occurs when he or she suffers a sudden and fatal collapse. Just one adult heartworm can be deadly if a cat experiences an allergic reaction. Luckily, many cats can survive with a heartworm in their system and do not experience an allergic reaction, but there is no way to determine which cats will or will not be affected. The larval stage of the heartworm is carried by mosquitos and is transmitted to the cat (or dog) when it is bitten by a mosquito. There currently is no safe or approved product for the treatment of adult heartworms in cats as there is for dogs.

Most of us have personal knowledge and experience with mosquitos. They can sneak up and bite us (or our pets) at any time. Unfortunately, that is the price of living in paradise in southwest Florida. Think your indoor cat isn't at risk? A university study revealed that 55 percent of cats that tested positive for heartworm were kept completely or primarily indoors (Feline Heartworm Infections, a clinical survey in the USA, Proceedings of the WAAVP, 1997).

Luckily, we can prevent this potentially deadly disease by giving cats a preventative once a month, just like we do with dogs. There are two options that you can obtain from your veterinarian. One is an oral medication that is flavored like a treat and also protects against some intestinal parasites. The other choice is a topical liquid that is applied to the back of the neck and helps to prevent fleas, ticks, mites and intestinal worms, in addition to heartworms. Do your feline companion a favor, and talk to your veterinarian about placing your cat on one of these heartworm preventatives 12 months out of the year, so that you do not have to worry about those pesky mosquitos or tragically losing your beloved cat.