

Heartworm Management

(Updated 10/2024)

The ASV supports the application of the American Heartworm Society guidelines for the prevention, diagnosis, and management of canine and feline heartworms in order to protect individual animal health and welfare and limit heartworm transmission within the shelter and community.^{1,2} The ASV also acknowledges that community animal care providers, including sheltering organizations, may not always be able to meet all recommendations. Factors that may warrant alternative evidence-based approaches to heartworm management include: accessibility, affordability, resource allocation, capacity for care, risks to population health and, for shelters, compromised welfare brought on by prolonged shelter stays.

Because some transmission risk exists year-round regardless of geographic location, shelters are urged to maintain their dogs, cats, and ferrets on heartworm preventive medications year-round. For owned pets, providers should recommend year-round prevention and recognize that if barriers to care exist, alternative strategies to mitigate risk can be explored, factoring in regional prevalence, geography, time of year, and weighing the cost of prevention against other necessary care.

The ASV recommends community animal care providers perform screening tests on at-risk dogs. Heartworm prevention should be provided even when screening is not performed. For infected dogs, the ASV recommends community animal care providers promptly institute therapy to reduce pathology and limit transmission.

Community animal care providers treating infected dogs should strive to ensure that resources used toward heartworm management do not compromise care of other animals or divert resources from other essential services. Everyone involved in the care of heartworm-positive dogs should be informed of the importance of adhering to each component of the selected management protocol.

Additionally, sheltering organizations treating infected dogs should ensure that:

- resources allow for the humane care of exercise-restricted dogs,
- operational policies promote off-site housing during treatment through the use of foster and/or adoptive homes,
- treatment protocol selection considers length of stay and individual animal medical and behavioral needs, and
- potential adopters are informed of the specific management protocol undertaken and are encouraged to consult with their veterinarian for further guidance.

Sheltering organizations without capacity to treat are encouraged to consider transfer of infected dogs to partners with such capacity or may consider release to an informed adopter with clear expectations for follow-up care. Shelters should reference published recommendations for Minimizing Heartworm Transmission in Relocated Dogs.³

References

1. American Heartworm Society. Current Canine Guidelines for the Prevention, Diagnosis, and Management of Heartworm Infection in Dogs. Revised 2024. Available online at: <https://www.heartwormsociety.org/resources/54-heartworm-guidelines/375-canine-heartworm-guidelines>
2. American Heartworm Society. Current Feline Guidelines for the Prevention, Diagnosis, and Management of Heartworm Infection in Cats. Revised 2020. Available online at: https://d3ft8sckhnqim2.cloudfront.net/images/pdf/2020_AHS_Feline_Guidelines_11_12.pdf?1605556516
3. American Heartworm Society and Association of Shelter Veterinarians. Minimizing Heartworm Transmission in Relocated Dogs. Revised 2021. Available online at: https://d3ft8sckhnqim2.cloudfront.net/images/ASV_AHS_Relocation_20April21.pdf?1618951627