

## **LOVE THEM OR LOSE THEM**

### **Heartworm: A Preventable Heartache for You and Your Dog**

The solution is as simple as a pill and for all breeds, especially our beloved Cairns; it is no longer an option but a necessity if their lives are to be long and healthy.

Enter Blue and Rainbow, two CPCRN darlings who came into foster care heartworm positive. Happily, Rainbow is now heartworm free and literally jumping for joy. Blue has completed his treatment and recovery period without incident and is waiting for his forever family to find him. They are the lucky ones. Unfortunately, some of the damage to heartworm positive Cairns that come under CPCRN's care is too severe and as a result, they cross over to the Rainbow Bridge.

Heartworm is an intricate spider web of parasites that can literally choke the life and spirit out of dogs, cats, and other mammals. First recognized in dogs more than 100 years ago, heartworm is on the rise and knows no geographic boundaries within the United States or Canada.

Serious and potentially fatal, heartworm develops when one of more than 30 species of infected mosquitoes bite a dog, typically where its coat is thinnest. The blood-borne parasites then move throughout the tissue, eventually occupying the right side of the heart. As the worms continue to grow and reproduce over the next six to seven months, baby worms are released into the bloodstream, mature, mate, and so the vicious cycle begins. Like strands of spaghetti, the adult worms are generally 6 - 14 inches in length. Mercilessly, they entangle themselves around the dog's heart, causing the vessel to enlarge and work excessively hard while blood clots form. When other mosquitoes bite an infected dog, they pick up the new, immature worms and transmit them to other canines.

Most dogs do not show outward signs of heartworm until they are 4 - 8 years old. Blue and Rainbow are both seven. Blue was rescued from a breeding facility where he did not receive the care that he deserved. Rainbow was an owner surrender and had been left tied outside without any heartworm protection. Most veterinarians recommend a heartworm blood test when a pup is just 6 months old and annually thereafter for life if the dog tests negative. Some veterinary practices begin puppies on heartworm preventative medication when they are just 4 - 6 weeks old. Heartworm is rarely diagnosed in a dog less than 1 year in age because the worms have not had a chance to mature and reproduce. The most obvious signs of heartworm are a soft, dry cough, shortness of breath, weakness, nervousness, and loss of stamina. These symptoms are particularly noticeable after exercise and sadly, severely infected dogs that are undiagnosed can die suddenly of congestive heart failure. Upon diagnosis the disease is often well advanced. However, the good news is that in many cases, heartworm is 95% curable.

The chances of survival after testing positive for heartworm depend on the number of adult worms present, their location, and the damage to the heart, lung, liver, and kidneys. The veterinarian's knowledge and skill, in addition to one's commitment to helping the dog through treatment, are also key to success.

For the heartworm positive dog, the road to recovery can be treacherous, and treatment for a Cairn in CPCRn can range from \$500 to more than \$1,000. Typically lab work is done first to confirm the presence of the disease and in some cases, X-rays. Most infected dogs require at least two injections of a highly poisonous medication to kill the heartworms. The shots are administered in the dog's lower back muscles, just above the hips, 24-hours apart. The injections are excruciating and most veterinarians administer pain-relieving medication beforehand. Short-term hospitalization may be required immediately thereafter depending upon the infection's severity. However, all recovering dogs must be closely monitored during this critical stage. Upon returning home, an ailing pet is to be kept absolutely quiet and indoors except for necessary potty breaks. It is helpful that Blue enjoys television so much, as that is how he occupies a good portion of his time while crated during recovery. Rainbow, couch potato and belly-rub lover that she is, accepted the quiet time well. In addition to ample rest, a strong dose of TLC is one of the best therapies. Often, medications are prescribed to keep inflammation down and to reduce coughing.

The recovery period for most heartworm positive dogs is 5 weeks, and you can be assured that Blue will not engage in chasing house cats during this time! A veterinarian may also prescribe medications to boost recovery. After the 5 weeks have elapsed, another test is done to ensure that the dog is free of baby heartworms that may not have been killed during initial treatment. If the results come back positive, oral medications will be administered with a re-test in 3 weeks. Should the dog test positive for heartworms again, another round of oral medications will be prescribed. After this treatment, the dog will usually test negative for baby heartworms, marking the end of the hardship.

All heartworm positive dogs should be re-tested 6 months after they are deemed heartworm free. This is to assure that any baby heartworms that weren't killed during initial treatment have not matured. A clean bill of health, however, does not guarantee that a dog will remain well unless he or she is provided with monthly heartworm medication and has an annual heartworm blood test. The same holds true for dogs that have never tested positive for heartworm. The FDA and CPCRn do not advocate the use of Proheart 6 as a form of heartworm prevention as it has been linked to canine deaths.

Our canine friends who have been cured of heartworm may still lack some of the stamina and spunk characteristic of their canine brothers and sisters. Even after successful treatment, there may be permanent scarring to vital organs and some dogs develop heart murmurs from heartworm infection. Fortunately, Blue and Rainbow do not appear to be faced with these obstacles. Still, think how different their lives could have been if someone had cared enough to spend a few dollars every month to give them a little pill (which also comes as a chewable) for heartworm prevention. By so doing, the four-legged ones who look to us for comfort and care would be spared the real heartache that accompanies this rampant but highly preventable disease.