

Everything You Need To Know about Heartworm

Prevent heartworm in your pets, but heartworm treatment in rescued dogs is almost always successful.

BY ASHLEY SIMPSON
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Coco was an upbeat, loving ten-year-old beagle when Homeward Trails Animal Rescue – a Northern Virginia-based rescue organization – took her under their wings.

Sue Bell, founder and owner of Homeward Trails, was eager to whisk Coco away from her previously lonely, uncomfortable (at best) life in a rural southwestern Virginia town. First, the Homeward Trails team would treat Coco for her multiple health issues, and then they would find her a loving owner in Northern Virginia who would finally give her the home and life that she deserved.

“Coco had the sweetest personality,” Bell recalled. “She came to us from rural Virginia, where clearly she had been neglected her entire life. Among so many preventable health problems, she had a heavy load of heartworms. Still, despite all her pain, she was a tail-wagging bit of sunshine. Sadly, she succumbed to the heartworms. She suddenly started coughing up gobs of blood, the oxygen level in her blood plunged, and despite the veterinarian’s efforts, she didn’t make it.”

Coco’s tragic story is a cautionary tale. While she was one of many dogs with heartworm – a mosquito-borne illness – who have come into the care of Northern Virginia rescue organizations over the past decade, she has also been one of the few that Bell has seen die from the disease.

Bell established Homeward Trails in 2001, and through the non-profit organization, her team pulls animals from low-income shelters, owners who cannot provide for them, and from other unfortunate situations. They then place their rescues into loving, permanent homes – primarily in the Mid-Atlantic.

Through her journey with animal rescue, Bell has discovered that heartworm disease is entirely preventable – and usually treatable when caught early (and even when caught not so early).

“With the thousands of dogs we’ve treated over the course of 21 years, we have a 99.99% success rate with heartworm,” Bell said. “Of thousands of dogs, we’ve lost less than ten to heartworm complications.”

The overwhelming majority of our dogs with the disease go on to live happy and healthy lives.”

This statistic, though, hinges on awareness of heartworm disease and taking necessary actions as early as possible.

What Is Heartworm Disease?

Heartworm disease is a mosquito-borne parasitic infection that impacts dogs, cats, and other animals, and it is every bit as unpleasant as its name indicates. While heartworm disease can infect a host of mammals, canines are the most commonly infected.

For dogs who have not been treated with prevention medication, heartworm disease is a relatively common disease. The infection is “caused by foot-long worms (heartworms) that live in the heart, lungs, and associated blood vessels of affected pets, causing severe lung disease, heart failure and damage to other organs in the body,” according to the American Heart-



Chelsea Jones of the AWLA and her dog Obie who was successfully treated for heartworm.



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worm Society.

Through just one bite, a mosquito can inject the larvae of parasitic worms directly into a dog’s body. These larvae travel through the bloodstream and settle into the dog’s heart, vessels, and lungs, where they grow and multiply. Over the course of six to seven months, they fully mature into worms that can be up to one foot long. Tangled up and taking up precious real estate in a dog’s vital organs, the parasites cause life-threatening, painful inflammation.

“Dogs are the natural host for heartworms and they can reproduce and survive in a dog,” Dr. Matt Novarr, DVM, veterinarian at Columbia Pike Animal Hospital, said. “Since cats, for example, are an atypical host, the worms do not progress into adulthood within them, and they only tend to have a few worms at a time if they do get an infection.”

On the other hand, dogs can ultimately host up to hundreds of worms (though the average is around 15). These worms can live within a dog between five and seven years.

Testing is required to confirm heartworm because

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PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED



PHOTO BY SHIRLEY RUHE

A letter carrier picks up his first sack of donated canned tuna and cereal at a front door at the beginning of his mail delivery route Saturday, May 13th. He puts the bag in the empty space in the back of his truck between his packages and letters ready for delivery. He says he expects the truck to be full of donations for AFAC at the end of the route. “But after I deliver them to the post office, I have another route today so will be going back out again.”

AFAC Benefits From Stamp Out Hunger Drive

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Arlington letter carriers juggled mail delivery with bags of canned goods, cereal and other non-perishable items left at front doors along their route at the Stamp Out Hunger food drive Saturday, May 13. The annual nationwide event is sponsored by the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) with the local food donations given to local nonprofits that feed the hungry, Arlington Food Assistance Center here in Arlington. It is held on the third Saturday of May each year.

Although Arlington residents are generous according to

Charles Meng, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AFAC, generally food contributions have been down because the economy has affected those who contribute as well as those who receive the supplemental groceries. AFAC is hit by a double whammy as prices rise for the food AFAC purchases and the need is greater for the growing number of families coming to AFAC each week. AFAC is an independent, community-based non-profit organization now serving over 3,000 families each week at 17 sites across Arlington and two new sites outside Arlington, an all-time high. AFAC continues to need donations of food, financial donations and volunteers. See <https://afac.org/>