



Hamilton Academy of Veterinarians



For immediate release

Ontario Veterinarians Call for Urgent Action to Stop Spread of Heartworm

November 3, 2009 - The Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA) and the Hamilton Academy of Veterinary Medicine (HAVM) are alerting all Hamilton-area humane societies, animal shelters and other organizations involved in animal adoption to the serious risk that dogs imported from heartworm-endemic areas of the United States pose to the general pet population.

Veterinarians are extremely concerned about a 10-fold increase in the number of "seen and treated" cases of heartworm disease in Hamilton and the surrounding area in 2008. This dramatic increase was particularly evident in dogs that had been imported into Canada from heartworm-endemic areas of the United States, specifically but not limited to Louisiana. In 2009, veterinarians are seeing the same type of dramatic increase in heartworm disease in dogs born and raised in Canada. It is believed that these dogs were infected by mosquitoes that had come into contact with imported dogs carrying the disease.

Proper preventative testing

The American Heartworm Society has developed a preventative testing protocol for dogs eight months of age or older to ensure that every dog is free of heartworm disease. This protocol specifies that the dog must have three negative heartworm tests; an initial test, followed by a second test at 4 months and a final test at 9 months after the initial test. During this period the dog must also be on a monthly preventative heartworm medication.

Unfortunately, dogs are being imported from heartworm-endemic areas having had only one negative heartworm test; this does not confirm that a dog is free from the disease.

Dogs brought into Canada from heartworm-endemic areas without first being tested according to the American Heartworm Society's protocol pose a significant health risk to the domestic dog and cat population, as well as local wildlife.

Adopting a heartworm positive dog also poses a significant emotional and financial burden on the dog's new family. If left untreated, heartworm is life-threatening and the treatment can be costly. Unfortunately, there are no available treatments for infected cats.

What can adoption agencies do to help?

OVMA and the HAVM are encouraging all individuals and organizations that have adopted out dogs that were imported from heartworm-endemic areas to contact the dog's new owner and encourage them to have their new pet properly tested. It is also recommended that these pet owners consult their veterinarian immediately.

"Ontario veterinarians are urging all humane societies, SPCA's, animal shelters, rescue groups and any other organization or individuals importing dogs from the United States to cease the importation of all dogs from heartworm-endemic areas, unless they have been tested according to the American Heartworm Society's protocol and declared heartworm free by a licensed veterinarian," commented Dr. Randy Sterling, a member of HAVM.

Advice for pet owners:

- Before adopting a dog, ask the adoption agency if the dog was imported from another country.
- If the dog was imported from a heartworm endemic area, ask for written confirmation that it has passed the three phase American Heartworm Society test.
- If you own a dog, ensure that it is tested regularly for heartworm disease and is receiving a monthly heartworm preventative during mosquito season (June to November).
- If you own a cat, talk to your veterinarian about whether the cat should also be taking medication to prevent heartworm.

Your veterinarian is your best resource for understanding and managing this disease. Please help the veterinary community to protect pet owners and their beloved pets from the negative consequences of this serious and preventable disease.

For media inquiries regarding this issue, please contact:

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