



## Companion Animal Alliance Approaching Heartworm Disease

Dear fosters,

Heartworm disease has been found in animals worldwide and represents a significant health threat to both cats and dogs. The prevalence of this disease is significant in Louisiana and the surrounding “deep south” states because of our high mosquito population and warm, wet climate year round. For animals not on preventative, it is not a matter of “if” they will get the disease, but “when.” In the CAA population, approximately 42-48% of dogs eligible for testing are diagnosed with heartworm disease each year. You, our devoted fosters, are rightfully concerned about this disease. This document will hopefully answer some of the more common questions we receive. The most thorough and up-to-date information regarding heartworm disease can be found at the [American Heartworm Society](#) website.

The most common questions we receive regard “fast kill” vs “slow kill” and the role you can play in the treatment of your foster pet. Please note that most of this information pertains to dogs; this letter will not directly address heartworm disease in cats.

Treatment of heartworm disease in dogs relies on three primary components:

1. Administration of heartworm preventative to prevent further infection and to stop certain life stages from progressing
2. Administration of an antibiotic (either doxycycline or minocycline;) doxycycline or minocycline are used to kill a [bacteria](#) that has a [symbiotic](#) relationship with the heartworm, thus weakening the heartworm
3. Administration of injections of melarsomine, which kill adult heartworms living in the heart and pulmonary artery

The “slow kill” method of addressing heartworm disease utilizes a portion of the “fast kill” method, and relies on weakening the heartworms in hopes that they will die off more quickly (adult worms can live upwards of 7 years in a dog’s heart.) This is achieved by administering an antibiotic along with a monthly heartworm preventative. The slow kill method does NOT involve the injection of adulticides which kill the adult heartworms, and thus can take up to two years to be effective. Because this method takes substantially longer to rid the heart of worms, damage is still being done to the heart. Controlled activity is essential during this treatment to minimize stress on the heart, lungs, and vascular system. The fast kill is recommended by the American Heartworm Society and is believed to be a better treatment.

The “fast kill” method utilizes all the components of the “slow kill,” but injections of melarsomine are administered to kill off the adult worms living in the heart. It is imperative that patients are kept calm and cool during the course of this treatment to minimize side effects as the worms die off and are processed by the body.

At CAA, we simply do not have the resources to put all our heartworm positive dogs through this treatment, though we are always looking for resources to expand our scope of care. We do, however, allow fosters to sponsor the antibiotic portion of treatment for their pets, and we are able to prescribe this medication in-house. Additionally, fosters are welcome to seek outside veterinary care to administer the injections as long as we have communication with the outside office and get all medical records from the treating veterinarian.

It is worth noting that an animal on slow kill is "ready to go" to receive fast kill at any point once they have completed 30 days of doxycycline or minocycline and have received two consecutive months of heartworm prevention (though, ideally, there is a 30 day period after the last day of doxycycline before injections are given). In other words, fosters and adopters are not "locked in" to a treatment course if they choose not to commit to fast kill from the beginning.

The veterinary team and foster team are happy to answer any questions not covered above, and we thank you for your continued efforts on behalf of the animals at CAA.

Be well,

Dr. Sarah