

I found a dog at the local shelter I would like to adopt but he isn't completely healthy. He has heartworms and is undergoing treatment for them. Will the heartworms be something that cause a problem for the rest of his life? Should I adopt him or look for a different dog?

Heartworms are a scary disease that we work hard to prevent. Understanding the disease will help you understand the lasting affects it has on a dog. Heartworms are spread by mosquitoes. A mosquito bites a dog infected with heartworms and picks up the microfilariae (immature heartworms). Microfilariae mature into the infective larval stage inside the mosquito. Then, if the mosquito bites another dog, the infective stage of the larvae enter the animal through the bite. It takes 6 months for the larvae to mature into adult heartworms in the dog, the stage at which a blood test will be able to diagnose the disease. The worms live in the pulmonary arteries and lungs and occasionally in the right side of the heart causing serious damage.

Dogs with an early infection may not show any signs of disease while those with a longer standing infection may have a cough and tire easily. They also may be lethargic, have a decreased appetite and weight loss.

Adult heartworms in dogs are killed using injections of an adulticidal drug that is injected into the muscle of the back. Most cases of heartworms in dogs are successfully treated, although the treatment is expensive, requires careful monitoring by your veterinarian and can have complications. Severely limiting your dog's activity is very important during the treatment period. Risks of treatment include muscle soreness and inflammation, blockage of blood flow through the lungs by dead worms, and shock.

Prior to treatment, dogs are staged based on the severity of their disease. This determination is made by evaluating blood work and x-rays of your pet's lungs and heart. Stage one is the least severe and stage four is the most severe. Stage four is the most difficult to treat and carries a poorer prognosis. Depending on what stage of the disease the dog has, there may or may not be lasting signs of heartworm disease. The most common signs would be a cough, increased respiratory effort and decreased energy.

Ask to speak with the shelter's veterinarian about this particular dog to find out what stage the dog was prior to treatment and what they feel his prognosis is. Many heartworm treated dogs make great pets and live normal lives.

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