

Adopting a Heartworm Positive Dog

This dog is infected with heartworm. Heartworm is a parasite that is transmitted to dogs through mosquito bite. The mosquito transmits a young form of the heartworm to the dog through its bite, and then the heartworm matures within the dog's body. Eventually, the adult heartworms reside in the heart and cause heart failure if they are not addressed with therapy that can kill the adult worms.

A veterinary exam, screening blood work, and x-rays have been done to assess how severe the infection appears to be in this dog. Based on this lab work, treatment with injectable medication (called Immiticide®) to kill the adult heartworms is recommended.

□ The Treatment & Cautions

- a FAMD currently uses the strategy for heartworm treatment recommended by the American Heartworm Society. This protocol involves administration of injections of Immiticide® that are spaced in the way recommended to most effectively treat heartworm infection.
- a There are considerable risks associated with heartworm treatment.
 - The medication used can be toxic and as the heartworms die they sometimes cause fatal complications.
 - The most important thing an owner can do for their pet after each round of heartworm treatment is to ensure that the animal is rested. This is important because as the heartworms are killed by Immiticide®, they have to be slowly dissolved and eliminated by the immune system.
 - Exercise can cause these dissolving heartworms to move out of the heart and travel to the lungs, causing complications that range from a treatable cough to loss of energy, nose bleed, fever, difficulty breathing, and in severe cases it will cause death.
- a The total duration of therapy from the first injection to the time that the dog can return to full exercise is 4-8 weeks, depending on the severity of infection and number of injections needed. **Please refer to the custom Heartworm Treatment & Care Timeline to see where this dog currently is in the treatment process.**
- a Adopters are strongly encouraged to make an appointment with FAMD's partner clinic for a post-adoption health exam. This exam is very important because it will give the adopter a chance to discuss heartworm treatment, an exercise restriction plan, and future prevention with a veterinarian.

□ Activity Restrictions

- a Prior to starting treatment, heartworm positive dogs can have unlimited leash walks and normal housing. Heavy exercise that elevates heart rate substantially such as fence running, off leash active play with other dogs, or Frisbee chasing should be avoided.
- a Once the dog has begun heartworm treatment with Immiticide®, adopters should be prepared to provide exercise restriction as follows:
 - Activity that elevates heart rate and respiratory rate needs to be avoided at all times. Examples include any type of activity that makes the dog pant actively such as long walks in warm temperatures, off leash activity, fence running, Frisbee chasing, rough housing with other dogs, etc.
 - Dogs prone to sprinting at the door when visitors arrive or running up and down the stairs in the home should be restricted from doing so by leashing. Any outdoor activity should be on leash to keep dogs from sprinting after squirrels or other exciting things.

- Leash walks should be short and slow.
 - When the dog cannot be monitored, choices must be made based on the temperament of the dog to keep them safe and healthy. This may include housing in a crate or small room in the home for some dogs, for others this will not entail further restriction.
 - Some dogs that are prone to constant high energy activity may need a crate and medication to help keep them calm during this period.
- a The adopter can discuss what appropriate exercise restriction will entail based on the dog's energy level, personality, and the home environment with a veterinarian post-adoption. Although rest after heartworm treatment is a serious priority, it is a temporary issue. Four weeks after the last injection of Immiticide®, the dog can return to normal activity.
- **Monthly Heartworm Preventive**
- a Dogs that are under therapy with Immiticide® for heartworm infection should also receive a monthly heartworm preventative. Ivermectin based heartworm preventatives (i.e. Heartgard®, Iverhart®, or Tri-heart®) are safe and inexpensive for this purpose. Advantage-Multi is a combination heartworm-flea product that can be considered as well that is labeled for this purpose. Being on a monthly preventative is a key part of heartworm therapy as it prevents future infection and eliminates the offspring from the adult heartworms over time.
- a The dog you are adopting might be taking a medication called doxycycline. This is an antibiotic that kills a type of bacteria that lives within the heartworms. This bacteria contributes to some of the damage that heartworm disease can do to the dog's body, so it is important to give this medication as prescribed.
- **Costs**
- a FAMD will cover the cost of heartworm treatment, if the adopter chooses to have this performed and scheduled through our partner clinic.
- If the adopter would prefer to have their new pet treated for heartworm at a different veterinary clinic, then they are welcome to do so at their own expense.
- a The adopter will pay for:
- Any additional prescribed medications
 - Standard vaccinations, medications, other follow-up care and tests
 - Heartworm tests and preventive medication
 - Cost of treating any complications that may arise post-treatment regardless of where heartworm treatment is being performed.
 - Cost of any future heartworm treatment that may be needed. Six months after heartworm treatment, this dog can be heartworm tested, at adopter's expense, to confirm if heartworm therapy was effective. Additional treatment is at the adopter's cost.

Information contained in this handout was resourced from the Veterinary Information Network and the American Heartworm Society websites. For more information on heartworm, adopters are encouraged to visit: <https://heartwormsociety.org/pet-owner-resources/heartworm-basics>.

Adapted from document created by the Humane Society of Huron Valley.