

PAWS for Action – Losing Heart
To run 3/20/2016

The Latin term is *Dirofilaria immitis*. It is the bane of animal shelters where too many infected dogs are surrendered due to the cost of treatment. The more common term is heartworm, a parasitic roundworm that is spread from host to host through the bites of mosquitoes.

Heartworm is preventable but to obtain the medication requires a veterinary exam and a medical test. I called one local veterinary clinic where a first time exam was quoted at \$40 and the blood test to determine if the dog already has heartworm is \$39. If the test is negative you will be able to purchase the preventative medication which is priced at about \$10 per month for a 40 pound dog.

While this is a financial burden for many people, it is nothing compared to treating a heartworm infection which can run \$1,000 or more. The treatment is risky, requiring several weeks to months of restricted activity.

In spite of this many pet owners will take their chances, hoping for the best. If you live in the Southeast this is a vain hope as the disease is rampant here. It is almost a guarantee that at some time in the life of your dog he or she will contract this deadly worm if not protected.

It is a slow and painful end of life, usually resulting in congestive heart failure. It is not something you would wish on your worst enemy, let alone your best friend.

The moral of the story is that prevention is much better than having to treat heartworm once a dog is infected. It comes in the form of a treat which makes it easy to administer for both humans and their pets.

PAWS Humane in Columbus operates a low cost wellness clinic three days per week. The demand for our services is so high that we tend to be booked out for three to four weeks. Between December 1 and February 29 we surveyed all new clients and found that 49% had never taken their pet to a veterinary clinic. This is consistent with reports asserting that half of all pets in the U.S. have never been seen by a veterinarian.

The number one reason pet owners give for failing to take their pets to a veterinarian is cost. If the economics of veterinary care is an issue it is up to you to take charge of it. Let your veterinarian know why you are there and what you want from the visit. Ask questions about treatment options and pricing.

You don't necessarily have to sign your pet up for every medical test and every vaccine to be a good pet owner. Most of us make choices based on our pocketbooks and what we feel our pet really needs to stay healthy. For instance some vaccines come with risks that you may or may not want to take depending on where you take your pet and the activities you engage in.

The point is that as the consumer you get to pick and choose the services and service providers that are appropriate for you and your pet. But whatever you do, please choose prevention of heartworm for your very best friend.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.