

What is *Angiostrongylus vasorum*?

A. vasorum is a parasite that infects all members of the dog family. It is a roundworm that lives in the heart and the major blood vessels supplying the lungs (pulmonary arteries). Also known as “French heartworm” it should not be confused with heartworm which is caused by an entirely different parasite called *Dirofilaria*. If left untreated *A. vasorum* can cause numerous problems including sudden death.

How does a dog become infected?

Slugs and snails act as a host for the larvae of the worm. If your dog eats an infected slug or snail or an infected slime trail) the larvae are freed into the dogs’ intestines. The larvae migrate through the gut wall and then through the liver and veins to the right heart and the artery to the lungs where they develop to the adult stage. This process takes about 10 days from initial infection.

The adult females then produce eggs which are transported by the blood stream to the lungs where the immature larvae hatch out in the small blood vessels. These larvae then migrate through the lung tissue causing an inflammatory reaction. They then pass into the airways where they are coughed up and then swallowed.

These larvae travel through the intestines and are passed out into the environment in the dog’s faeces. Slugs and snails which come into contact with these faeces are then infected and the whole cycle starts again.

The disease cannot be directly transmitted from dog to dog and humans are not at risk of this disease.

What are the signs of lungworm infection?

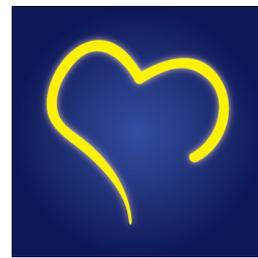
Dogs of any age can become infected by lungworm but there appear to be two higher risk groups:

1. Younger dogs,
2. Dogs that eat slugs and snails.

Lungworm can cause a number of different symptoms many of which can be confused with other disease processes, so if your dog shows any of these symptoms you should seek veterinary advice.

Symptoms fall into several main areas;

1. Breathing problems for example coughing or breathlessness due to damage to the lungs,
2. Unexplained bleeding – such as nose bleeds or excessive bleeding from minor wounds, bleeding into the eyes or pallor,
3. Unexplained weight loss,
4. Changes in behaviour such as lethargy, tiredness and seizures,
5. Reluctance to exercise.



Diagnosis of lungworm

Diagnosis can be made from examination of faeces samples under a microscope as the immature worms are not visible to the naked eye. However intermittent shedding of immature worms can make this method inaccurate.

There is also a blood test that can rapidly detect proteins released from worms.

Sometimes diagnosis is made through analysis of samples collected from the lungs during bronchoscopy (examination of the lungs using a small camera).

Can lungworm be treated?

There are several medications available that will successfully treat lungworm. These medications are only available on prescription from your veterinary surgeon.

Whilst lungworm infection has the potential to be fatal, many dogs are treated successfully and make a complete recovery.

Can lungworm be prevented?

It is hard to prevent your dog having contact with slugs and snails and their slime trails. However the good news is that medications are available that can protect your dog. These medications are only available from your vet and need to be given monthly.

Other measures you can take to reduce the risk of infection include:

- Removing toys from garden overnight,
- Making sure the outside water bowl is clean,
- Collect any faeces as soon as possible.

Key points

- The symptoms of lung worm are variable,
- The disease can be prevented by monthly treatment with an appropriate prescription only product,
- *Angiostrongylus* can be successfully treated.