

# POINTERS ON PETS

## Protecting Cats From Heartworm

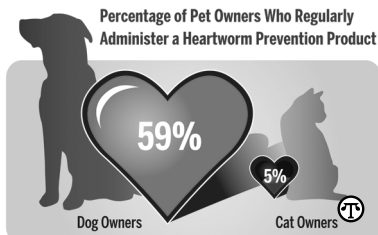
(NAPSA)—Heartworm disease is a serious risk to feline health that harms or even kills thousands of cats each year. While it is a very preventable disease, studies show that fewer than 5 percent of U.S. households with cats regularly administer heartworm prevention, while 59 percent of dog-owning households do so regularly.

Veterinarians say this lack of prevention leaves cats at risk of developing HARD (Heartworm Associated Respiratory Disease). HARD attacks a cat's lungs and is particularly dangerous because it is often misdiagnosed as feline asthma, allergies or bronchitis. Fortunately, a new program called KNOW Heartworms may help keep cats safe.

The initiative is based on new data outlined in the updated American Heartworm Society (AHS) Feline Guidelines and focuses on these five myths and misunderstandings surrounding feline heartworm:

- **Dogs vs. Cats:** Heartworm is not just a canine disease, and it affects cats differently than dogs. While cats typically have fewer worms than dogs, and the life span of the worm is shorter in cats, the consequences for felines can be much more serious.

- **Indoor vs. Outdoor Cats:** It only takes one mosquito to infect a cat, and because mosquitoes can get indoors, both indoor and outdoor cats are at risk. In fact, one North Carolina study showed that 28 percent of cats



Source: BNR Tracking

diagnosed with heartworm were inside-only cats.

- **It's a Heart Disease:** "Heartworm disease" is a misnomer; it mostly affects the lungs, not just the heart. The disease frequently is mistaken for asthma and other respiratory diseases.

- **Adult Heartworms vs. Larvae:** New research shows that heartworm larvae at all stages, not just adult worms, can cause serious health problems.

- **Diagnosis:** Accurate diagnosis can be difficult, since negative antigen and antibody tests don't automatically rule out the presence of heartworms. Chronic signs of feline heartworm disease include difficulty breathing, coughing or gagging, heavy or fast breathing and vomiting. More acute signs can be weight loss, lethargy, seizures, fainting and loss of coordination. However, some cats with heartworm infection may exhibit no signs of disease.

### Understanding HARD

According to Charles Thomas (Tom) Nelson, DVM, president of the AHS, both the veterinary community and the cat-owning public have a long way to go in developing awareness about the

risks of feline heartworm disease. It's a belief echoed by James R. Richards, DVM, director of the Feline Health Center at Cornell University and a past president of the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP).

"It is important that we be aware of the range of risks an animal can face and make sure they receive regular checkups," explains Dr. Richards. "As we're learning with heartworm, the dangers are much more significant than previously thought."

The KNOW Heartworms campaign is sponsored by the AHS and AAFP and funded by an educational grant from Pfizer Animal Health. It's hoped that it will help increase awareness and help pet owners avoid tragic situations such as the one faced by Ashley Jones. Jones, a resident physician, came home one day to find her one-and-a-half-year-old indoor cat Harley lying motionless on the floor. After rushing her to the vet for examination, the doctors determined that Harley had died from heartworm disease.

"My husband and I felt helpless, and wished there was something we could have done to prevent [Harley's death]," says Jones. She and her husband now protect their other cat against heartworms and work to raise awareness of the disease.

For more information on HARD and ways to prevent feline heartworm disease, visit the Web site [www.knowheartworms.org](http://www.knowheartworms.org).