The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has had an impact on so many aspects of our daily lives, including the way we practice veterinary medicine. Last spring, many clinics were closed except for emergency and critical care. In a survey conducted this summer by the American Heartworm Society (AHS), over 90% of veterinary practices were offering curbside services, with pet owners dropping off their pets for appointments. In addition to practice changes, some pet owners remain reluctant to leave their homes for their pet’s routine veterinary care, including heartworm prevention and treatment.

How would you handle the following scenarios?

Case 1: Like many families during the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. and Mrs. Brown were working from their home in South Carolina in March and the kids were “attending” school online. With everyone at home, they decided it was a good time to adopt a puppy. Jasmine, a female yellow lab mix, is now 10 months old. Because of the 5-month lapse in prevention, Jasmine needs heartworm testing before the new dog can join the family. Mrs. Brown does not want to risk exposing her to the virus. She asks if you can renew Ginger’s heartworm preventive over the phone without coming into the clinic.

Q. What would you recommend for heartworm prevention for Jasmine?

a. Refill the prescription with no questions asked.

b. Panic! Jasmine is probably already infected.

c. Give Mrs. Brown a prescription for heartworm preventive without seeing the dog in your clinic.

d. Bring Jasmine in for heartworm antigen and microfilariae tests and then prescribe a preventative.

A. The correct answers are c and d.

While the American Heartworm Society recommends annual testing for heartworms, there are situations, like the current pandemic, where routine care may not be possible. The AHS issued guidelines concerning effectiveness of the prevention program if a pre-existing infection becomes evident after starting older dogs (7 months of age or older) on a preventive, you’ll need to perform antigen and microfilaria testing. This avoids delays in detecting subclinical infections and the potential confusion concerning effectiveness of the preventive program if a pre-infection selection event occurs after beginning preventative.

Puppies that are started on a heartworm preventive after 8 weeks of age should be tested 6 months after the initial dose and annually thereafter. Jasmine is already 10 months old. Before starting older dogs (7 months of age or older) on a preventive, you’ll need to perform antigen and microfilaria testing. This avoids delays in detecting subclinical infections and the potential confusion concerning effectiveness of the preventive program if a pre-infection selection event occurs after beginning preventative.

Case 2: Mrs. Jones calls your clinic about her dog, Ginger, a 6-year-old golden retriever, who was due for her annual exam 5 months ago. She didn’t bring Ginger in at the scheduled time due to the pandemic restrictions. Mrs. Jones also ran out of heartworm preventative 3 months ago. She doesn’t want to bring Ginger in now because her elderly mother-in-law lives with the family and Mrs. Jones does not want to risk exposing her to the virus. She asks if you can renew Ginger’s heartworm preventive over the phone without coming into the clinic.

Q. How do you proceed?

a. Refill the prescription with no questions asked.

b. Tell Mrs. Jones her pets are ok.

c. Because of the 5-month lapse in prevention, Ginger needs heartworm testing before the prescription can be refilled. Explain to Mrs. Jones that she can drop Ginger off in the parking lot and stay in her car, minimizing potential exposure to coronavirus.

d. If, however, as in Ginger’s case, a lapse of 3 to 6 months in heartworm preventive administration, heartworm testing is strongly recommended to ensure that a pre-existing infection becomes evident after starting preventative.

A. The correct answers are a and c.

According to the AHS Canine Guidelines, puppies should be started on preventives as early as possible, ideally by 6 weeks of age. See the AHS website for a table of all current FDA-approved preventives. For an adult on a heartworm preventive that weighs 50 pounds or more, the addition of a mosquito repellent/ectoparasiticide should also be considered.

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PROTECT YOUR PET 12 MONTHS A YEAR. TEST YOUR PET EVERY 12 MONTHS.