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Understanding Lungworm in dogs

What is lungworm?]

Lungworm is an emerging parasite that affects dogs in the UK. It has become very common in Southern England and South Wales and cases are increasingly occurring in Northern England and Scotland. This is a potentially fatal disease so something we all need be aware of.

Lungworm (Angiostrongylus vasorum) is a parasite that can cause breathing problems and coughing due to its effects on the lungs. It can also affect blood clotting which can potentially cause nose bleeds, bleeding into the eye and excessive bleeding from minor wounds, among other signs.

How do dogs catch it?]

Lungworm parasites can be carried by dogs and foxes, so it appears increasing numbers of foxes, especially in urban areas, increases the spread of the parasite. Dogs become infected by ingesting slugs or snails (or their slime) as these contain the infective larvae. Any dog eating slugs, snails or grass in an affected area is at risk.

Larvae may also be ingested by dogs when drinking from puddles. Dog toys or bowls left out in the garden at night are thought to be a source of infection as they attract slugs and snails and may get covered in slime. The parasite does not pass directly from dog to dog. However, picking up dog faeces will reduce the level of parasites getting into the slug/snail population.

Interesting fact?lungworm does not affect cats!

What are the symptoms to look for?]

Lungworm disease can easily be missed as often the signs can mimic a lot of other diseases e.g. clotting disorders, bronchitis, neurological signs, anaemia, general malaise etc.

Diagnosis is either from finding larvae in faeces of an affected dog or from a blood test detecting presence of the parasite. Also, chest x-rays or endoscopy of the airways may be used if there are respiratory signs.

Treatment]

Prompt treatment is needed of affected cases as the disease can be fatal, unfortunately. However, cases caught early enough can be treated and will usually recover.

Prevention of this parasite is with monthly use of a suitable anti parasitic. Routine combined roundworm/tapeworm treatments are ineffective against this parasite. Only those products available from your vet or on prescription will be effective. Milbemycin (eg Milbemax) will prevent this parasite but needs to be given monthly.

Other measures to reduce risk of infection include:

- trying to stop your dog eating slugs or snails- avoiding leaving toys outside overnight- regularly cleaning outside water bowls- picking up poo - this reduces the spread of the parasite

If you think your dog may be at risk or is showing symptoms, please speak to one of the team at Oakhill for advice.