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Foster Manual for Heartworm Positive Dogs

Thank you for opening your home and heart to a heartworm-positive dog in need. By fostering a dog through heartworm treatment, you're helping them survive a life-threatening illness and preparing them for a healthy future.

This manual will guide you through the heartworm treatment process and provide the information you need to keep your foster dog safe, comfortable, and on the path to recovery.

What is Heartworm Disease?

Heartworm disease is a serious condition caused by parasitic worms (*Dirofilaria immitis*) that live in the heart, lungs, and blood vessels of infected dogs. It's transmitted by mosquitoes and can lead to severe lung disease, heart failure, and death if left untreated.

Treatment is effective, but it requires a strict period of rest and monitoring, as complications can arise when the adult worms die and are absorbed by the body. Heartworm is NOT contagious to dogs or other animals.

Your Responsibilities as a Foster

As a foster caregiver, your main responsibilities include:

- Providing a calm, low-stress environment
- Enforcing strict activity restrictions
- Administering medications as prescribed
- Monitoring for side effects or complications
- Attending all veterinary appointments
- Keeping in close communication with the rescue/shelter

Activity Restrictions

The most critical part of heartworm treatment is **strict rest**. As the worms die, they break down and can block blood vessels or cause inflammation, especially if the dog's heart rate is elevated.

Do:

- Use a crate or small room for confinement
- Take short, calm leashed walks for bathroom breaks only
- Provide mental stimulation like frozen Kongs or chew-safe toys
- Keep the dog away from stairs or excitement



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Do Not:

- Allow running, jumping, or zoomies
- Encourage tug-of-war or active play
- Take your foster to dog parks or long walks
- Let your foster play roughly with other pets

Treatment Timeline Overview

Heartworm treatment is typically completed in 3 phases over 3–6 months:

Phase One (30 days):

- Start on monthly heartworm prevention
- Begin 30 days of **doxycycline** (an antibiotic that weakens the worms)
- Strict rest

Phase Two (Injections):

- Two Diroban injections (24 hours apart) to kill adult worms
 - In severe cases, a third injection may be required.
- Pain, swelling, or mild lethargy are common after injections
- This is the **highest-risk period** for complications—strict rest is essential

Phase Three (60 days):

- Continue crate rest and medication (Prednisone and Gabapentin)
- Gradually return to activity 60 days after last injection
- Heartworm re-test may be done 6 months post-treatment

Medications

You may be given some or all of the following:

- **Heartworm Preventative** – Monthly pill to stop new infections
- **ProHeart 6/ProHeart 12** – Heartworm Preventative in the form of an injection that lasts either 6 or 12 months respectively.
- **Doxycycline** – Antibiotic given for several weeks to kill bacteria associated with heartworms
- **Prednisone** – Steroid to reduce inflammation in the lungs and blood vessels
- **Gabapentin** – Often prescribed after injections to reduce discomfort



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Important: Always give medications **with food**, unless specifically instructed otherwise. Giving medication, especially **doxycycline**, on an empty stomach can cause **vomiting** and gastrointestinal upset. Medications, especially prednisone, may cause an increased appetite and thirst. This means they may need more frequent potty breaks during treatment.

Follow the medication schedule carefully, and alert the Foster Coordinator if you miss a dose or notice side effects such as vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite, or lethargy.

Daily Care Tips

- Keep a quiet and predictable routine
- Use baby gates, crates, or exercise pens to limit exercise and stair use
- Provide soft bedding and plenty of water
- Offer safe enrichment like lick mats or food puzzles
- Use a leash to limit activity and prevent heavy exercise.