

Pets & Cancer Factsheet

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Can My Pet Develop Cancer?

Yes. Any animal can develop cancer / a tumour and as our pets live progressively longer lives their chances of developing such growths increases. A tumour is a growth of rogue or abnormal cells that are not susceptible to the body's normal control. It is important to realise that not all growths are life threatening and that the majority can be successfully treated. Some of these growths might appear as an unusual bump or swelling on our pets, however, growths can also occur internally and therefore might not be readily detectable.

Tumours And Cancer

Normal body cells grow, divide and die in an orderly fashion. During the early years of our pet's lives normal cells develop more rapidly until the pet becomes adult. After that, normal cells of most tissues divide only to replace worn-out or dying cells and to repair injuries. Cancer cells, however, continue to grow and divide, and might be able to spread to other parts of the body. These cells accumulate and form tumours (lumps) that might compress, invade and destroy normal tissue. If cells break away from such tumours, they can travel through the bloodstream, or the lymph system to other areas of the body. It is important to realise that not all tumours are cancerous. Benign (noncancerous) tumours do not metastasize and, with very rare exceptions, are not life-threatening. There are many different types of cancer and it is important to realise that even if a tumour is malignant the likelihood of spread, and speed of spread can vary dramatically.

The word "Tumour" has a very wide meaning applicable to all types of growth, some of which are not cancerous. The word "Cancer" is more specific and when correctly used refers only to tumours that are malignant. Malignancy refers to the tumours ability to metastasize (spread to other parts of the body), most commonly to the lungs and lymph glands.

Cancer is classified by the part of the body in which it began (even if it had metastasized to another part of the body), and by its appearance under a microscope. Different types of cancer vary in their rates of growth, patterns of spread, and responses to different types of treatment. This is why pets with cancer need treatment that is appropriate to the specific form of the disease that they are suffering from.

I Think My Pet Has A Tumour

Many of the signs associated with tumours are also signs associated with other diseases (e.g. weight loss, nausea, depression, etc). Even lumps can be caused by things other than tumours. However, small tumours, even a cancer, are more likely to be cured if they are treated early. It is therefore important to consult your veterinary surgeon as soon as possible if you think your pet might have a tumour. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to run a number of tests, including possibly the taking of a biopsy (sample of tissue), to determine whether it is a cancer, and if so what type.

Age need not be a barrier to treatment. Tumours are actually more common in older pets and many older pets are perfectly well except for their tumour.

How Will A Tumour Affect My Pet?

This will vary depending upon the type of tumour, the size of the tumour, and where the tumour is located. Most small tumours do not cause any problems and can therefore be difficult to detect, however, it is whilst a tumour is small that they are usually most easily treated. Tumours may become apparent due to an unusual bump on your pet, your pet may have lost weight for no obvious reason, your pet may appear unwell, your pet may be painful, your pet may be off its food or even nauseous, or your pet's behaviour might significantly change. Some tumours can cause strange neurological signs.

Will My Pet Be In Pain?

Most tumours are not excessively painful especially in their early stages. Many animals are remarkable for their ability to tolerate pain. Therefore, even if your pet is in pain they might not show it. Some types of tumour are more painful than others. Tumours attacking bones can be very painful. As a tumour progresses your pet might become increasingly uncomfortable, nauseous and depressed.

Treatment Options

Treatment choices for pets with cancer depend on the stage of the tumour, that is how developed it is, whether it has spread, and how far. Many tumours can be cured if they are treated in the early stages. Some tumours, although not curable, may be controlled for a period of time so that your pet can enjoy a normal, happy quality of life. Unfortunately, some tumours present when they are too advanced for treatment and in these cases euthanasia might be the kindest option.

- * Surgery, including freezing (cryo-surgery), and cautery (diathermy), is the oldest and still the main approach used to fight tumours.
- * Radiation therapy uses high-energy particles or waves, such as x-rays or gamma rays, to destroy or damage cancer cells.
- * Chemotherapy is the use of drugs to treat cancer. Systemic chemotherapy uses anti-cancer drugs that are usually given into a vein or by mouth. These drugs enter the bloodstream and reach all areas of the body, making this treatment suitable for treating cancers that have spread.
- * Immunotherapy is the use of treatments that promote or support the body's immune system response to a disease such as cancer.
- * Alternative and Complementary Therapies. Use of therapy that has not been scientifically tested and approved instead of standard therapies is referred to as alternative therapy. Some alternative therapies have dangerous or even life-threatening side effects. There is also the danger that your pet may lose the opportunity to benefit from standard therapies. The term Complementary Therapy refers to therapies used in addition to standard therapies. Some complementary therapies may help relieve certain signs associated with cancer, relieve side effects of conventional therapies, or even improve your pet's general sense of well-being. Clients considering using alternative or complementary therapies should first discuss their use with their veterinary surgeon.

Questions regarding this or on any other veterinary related matter must be discussed with your veterinary surgeon. The information contained herein is of a general nature only and may not relate to the specific conditions exhibited by your pet. Specifics of each case must be discussed with your veterinary surgeon. For further information, fact-sheets for clients and articles for veterinary surgeons, contact <http://members.aol.com/opvet>