

Tumors and Cancer

Basics

OVERVIEW

We usually refer to any abnormal lump or growth as a **tumor**. Most abnormal growths can be treated, often cured! Of course, everyone worries about **cancer**, the worst possible type of abnormal growth. Cancer is an uncontrolled growth of cells on or within the body. Cancer may be localized, invade nearby tissues, or spread throughout the body. When a tumor spreads beyond its borders or thru the body, we then say that the cancer is **malignant**.

Benign growths, those not likely to spread locally or through the body, are far more common than malignant growths! That is the good news. Many growths are not even true tumors, they may only be abnormal overgrowth of normal tissues. Granulomas, collections of inflammatory and scar tissue are common. Cysts are also very common and occur when fluid and cellular materials are trapped in a pocket of tissue. Fatty tumors and adenomas (glandular tumors) are also seen frequently, with about 99% being curable by surgical removal!



SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

Species

- Cats
- Dogs

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

- Any abnormal swelling that persists or grows
- Sores which do not heal
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Chronic cough
- Vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Bleeding or discharge from any body area
- Unusual odors or changes in behavior
- Difficulty eating or swallowing
- Loss of strength or stamina
- Persistent lameness or stiffness
- Trouble breathing, urinating or defecating

CAUSES

The exact cause of most cancers is still uncertain but very strong evidence points to genetics as a major factor. This is certainly supported by certain breeds of dogs being highly prone to certain types of cancer.

Additionally, chemicals, smoke, viruses, radiation including sun exposure and other environmental factors can greatly influence the chance of your pet getting tumors and cancer. (Cats in the homes of smokers, for instance, have very high rates of oral cancers as they groom the smoke off the fur into the mouth! Dogs that sunbathe have increased incidence of skin cancers just like people do!)

Some cancers can be prevented; early spaying and neutering greatly reduces the rate of breast cancer in females and testicular and prostate cancer in males. Controlling sun exposure, especially in light-coat pets reduces the rate of many skin cancers.

HOW IS CANCER DIAGNOSED

- For surface lumps, aspiration or needle biopsy is often quick and easy
- Blood tests are important to assess general condition but there is no general blood test for cancer
- X-rays and ultrasound is often needed to find internal masses and may involve taking tissue biopsy
- **KEY POINT:** Questions like what kind of tumor, how aggressive is it, will it come back etc. **will require** histopathology...without this those questions usually cannot be answered

Treatment

- Most skin tumors can be surgically removed, and the cure rate is very high
- Internal tumors, like spleen tumors, often can be surgically removed as well
- Chemotherapy is essential for most malignant tumors and a cancer specialist may be needed
- Radiation is also available for aggressive tumors internal and external
- **KEY POINT:** Most tumors are cured surgically!

TYPES OF PET TUMORS AND CANCERS

- **Skin** tumors are very common in older dogs, but much less common in cats. Most skin tumors in cats are malignant, but in dogs they are more often benign. **ALL SKIN TUMORS** should be examined by your veterinarian.
- **Breast** tumors are very common. 50% of all breast tumors in dogs and 85% of all breast tumors in cats are malignant. Spaying your pet at 6 months of age will greatly reduce the risk of breast cancer. Surgery is the treatment of choice for this type of cancer.
- **Head & Neck** cancer of the mouth is common in dogs and less common in cats. A mass on the gums, bleeding, odor, or difficult eating are signs to watch for. Many swellings are malignant, so early aggressive treatment is essential. Cancer may develop inside the nose of both cats and dogs. Bleeding from the nose, difficulty breathing, or facial swelling may occur.
- **Lymphoma** is a common form of cancer in dogs and cats. It is characterized by enlargement of one or many lymph nodes in the body. A virus causes most of these cancers in cats. Chemotherapy is frequently very effective in controlling this type of cancer and many treatments are now available.
- **Feline Leukemia Complex:** The feline leukemia virus is contagious among cats and will occasionally cause true cancer. There is no evidence that it is contagious to humans. While a great deal of research is ongoing, no consistently effective treatment is presently available for virus-positive cats.

- **Testicular tumors** are rare in cats and common in dogs, especially those with retained testes. Most of these cancers are curable with surgery.
- **Abdominal Tumors:** Tumors inside the abdomen are common. It is difficult to make an early diagnosis. Weight loss and abdominal enlargement, vomiting, diarrhea and inappetence are common signs of these tumors. Hemangioma and hemangiosarcoma are most common but bladder tumors are also frequently seen.
- **Bone** tumors are most commonly seen in large breed dogs and rarely in cats. The leg bones, near joints, are the most common sites. Persistent lameness and swelling of the leg is an early sign of disease. Many of the above signs are also seen with non-cancerous conditions but still warrant prompt attention by your veterinarian to determine the cause. Cancer is frequently treatable, and early diagnosis will aid your veterinarian in delivering the best care possible.