

Cancer

Cancer is the leading cause of death in senior dogs. As we already know, this is a very serious disease that can affect virtually all areas of your dog's body. However, the spread of cancer is more rapid when certain areas of the body are reached, such as the lungs or liver. There are too many forms of cancer to discuss in this handout; so instead, we will discuss various signs that you can be mindful of and the available veterinary options.

There are many symptoms to watch for that might indicate your pet has developed a cancer. It is important to realize that many of these symptoms can be related to several other illnesses, so do not assume your dog has cancer until he has been officially diagnosed by a veterinarian. Unexplained weight loss, abdominal distention, respiratory distress, difficulty swallowing, changes in bowel consistency (diarrhea or constipation), blood or mucous in the stool, unusual bleeding or discharge, lameness, growths that can be felt through your pet's skin and any areas of skin discoloration should be reported to your veterinarian. Remember that these symptoms are merely indicators that you should bring your dog to see the veterinarian.

Unfortunately, there are no blood tests to determine whether or not cancer is present in our dogs. Therefore, acquiring a sample of the tumor through biopsy is often necessary and this sample is normally sent off to a specialized pathologist for microscopic examination. Many cancers can be cured if caught early enough and if the lump is small enough to surgically remove. Even after a lump is removed, your veterinarian may wish to send the sample to a pathologist to ensure that the margins of the growth are cancer free.

If your dog is diagnosed with cancer, many of the same treatment options available to humans are also available for pets. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy for pets is offered at most veterinary specialty practices in major metropolitan areas. Your veterinarian will be able to share more information about these treatment options with you. It is important to understand that these therapies are costly and some forms of cancer are more easily treated than others. If chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy are not an option, your dog can be treated symptomatically, and depending on how aggressive the cancer is, your dog may be able to live for several months to a year. Other medications and therapeutic options will be outlined by your veterinarian.

There are steps that can be taken to avoid cancers. Having your pet spayed or neutered will drastically decrease the chances of various reproductive cancers. Feeding your dog a high quality diet and keeping him at a healthy weight will also help to prevent certain cancers. Obesity is a major cause of many cancers in pets. It is impossible to prevent all cancers and genetics also play a role in this disease. If you have any additional questions about a specific cancer or are concerned about your dog, please do not hesitate to discuss this with your veterinarian.