



American Animal Hospital

Caring for your pets as if they were our own.

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So Your Pet Has Cancer – Now What?

You've just been handed a very scary diagnosis for one of your furry family members, and no matter how gently your veterinarian tried to break the news, it's still a terrifying proposition. So what do you do? Well, first of all, take a deep breath! Treatments for cancer in pets change almost as fast as they do in people, and there may be a lot of options left open to you. You also need to know that each type of cancer is different, and each individual's cancer will respond differently too. Your veterinarian will be able to provide you with more specifics about your pet's type of cancer, prognosis and what treatment choices are most likely to work.

Diagnosis, Grading & Staging

Cancer is, by definition, a malignant – not benign – tumor, which means it has the potential to metastasize (or spread) to other parts of the body. Some malignant tumors, like tumors in the mouth, are also very locally invasive and may erode into bone, blood vessels, etc. Definitive diagnosis is achieved by biopsy, but your veterinarian may have a strong suspicion based on the results of a fine needle aspirate or other labwork. Once we know what kind of tumor we're dealing with, we move on to grading and staging the cancer to determine how best to handle it. Tumor grade is a measure of how aggressive the cancer is and how fast it is likely to grow. This is done by a pathologist, ideally with a biopsy sample, although sometimes an aspirate will be sufficient. Staging a tumor involves determining how far (if at all) it has already spread. This may involve radiographs, ultrasound, lymph node biopsy, and sometimes bone marrow aspirates, depending on the type of tumor and where it is most likely to spread. Just like with tumor grade, a lower number (ie: Stage 1) gives a better prognosis.

Surgery

For many types of cancer, surgery is our first and best option for eliminating the problem. With certain types, like low grade Mast Cell Tumors, surgical removal can be completely curative. In other cases, surgery can help to reduce the overall tumor size, improving comfort and making other treatments (radiation, chemo) more effective. Surgery also provides an excellent biopsy sample for grading the tumor. In some cases, surgery is only the first step and will need to be combined with either chemotherapy or radiation therapy to get the best results for your pet.

Chemotherapy

We've all heard the horror stories from cancer survivors about how miserable their chemotherapy was, so naturally pet owners assume the same thing will happen to their pets if they elect to try chemo. The good news for our furry friends is that chemo is rarely as bad for them. The goal for chemotherapy in pets is quality of life, so severe side effects are not acceptable. There is still the potential for stomach upset, but most breeds do keep all their fur. Other potential side effects may occur, depending on what medications are used, so your veterinarian may require regular bloodwork to be sure your pet isn't developing a problem. There are many different types of chemotherapy, and your pet's medications will be tailored to your needs as well as the type of cancer involved. Some protocols will necessitate regular visits with an oncology specialist to administer intravenous (IV) medications. Other protocols may be as simple as giving your pet a daily pill at home. If you elect to try chemotherapy with your pet, use extra caution when cleaning up after them – any body fluids (urine, vomit, feces, etc) can potentially carry chemo drug residues which may be harmful to you.

Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy is one of the newest treatment options for cancer in pets. Similar to radiation therapy in people, it involves administration of concentrated bursts of highly focused radiation to kill cancer cells. It can be very effective for some types of cancer (especially facial Squamous Cell Carcinoma), but as it can also damage healthy tissues, it is not for all cancers. The Veterinary Teaching Hospital at the University of Wisconsin – Madison is the closest facility for radiation therapy; their oncology department is world-renowned and we are happy to refer you to them at any time.

Palliative Care & Hospice

Sometimes the therapies discussed above aren't appropriate for the individual pet, or the family, involved. Whether the cancer is already too advanced, or there are other issues at home that make aggressive, expensive therapy unrealistic, there are still options available to you. Just because we *can* treat something, doesn't necessarily mean we always *should* – you may feel you simply aren't able to put your pet (and yourself) through intensive treatments and that's ok. In such a case, palliative care may be an excellent option. Palliative care means treating the symptoms of cancer (pain, nausea, poor appetite, etc) without treating the cancer itself. Even simple things, like pain medication, can make a big difference in the quality of time you have with your pet, and we are happy to do anything we can to help you this way. Hospice care is a fairly new concept in veterinary medicine, and we are fortunate to have an excellent hospice group in the Fox Valley. Hospice provides help with in-home treatments for your pet, whether that's administering medication, fluids, or giving owners an extra shoulder to lean on. They are also available for in-home euthanasia (for established hospice clients) when you decide it's finally time to say goodbye.

If you are interested in more information on hospice care or any of these therapies, please feel free to call us. Cancer is a scary diagnosis for most owners, and we are here to help you in any way we can!

