

Cancer.

By John Hintermeister, DVM, DACVIM

The word is as dark and empty as the disease it defines. A diagnosis of cancer often brings with it feelings of overwhelming fear, a spiraling sense of loss of control, and, most devastating of all, the loss of hope. This can occur regardless of whether the patient is a human family member or a precious pet. Following the diagnosis or possible diagnosis of cancer seeking information and the most appropriate care for your pet is advised.

The first step in facing cancer head on is to dispel the myths of the disease as well as its treatment. An owner should seek information so that the unknown and misconceptions can be replaced with knowledge and fact so that good decisions could be made. It is only by knowledge and understanding that owners can make the best decisions and begin to explore the opportunities for treatment.

The second step of cancer care is as vital as the first. Care of a loved pet can only be accomplished if it is a team effort. At the center of that team is the person who knows your pet's needs and desires better than anyone else in the world: you! You should research and find a team that is dedicated to the treatment of your pet's cancer. Incorporation of the owner into the team allows for optimal care of your pet's tumor.

Once you feel comfortable and knowledgeable that you have made the best decision for you and your pet, the cancer affecting your pet becomes attackable, diagnosable, treatable, manageable and in many cases, curable. It is at this point that the care may begin.

The following are frequently asked questions that will help you become knowledgeable about common cancer terms and treatments available for your pet.

What is cancer?

Cancer is an unrestrained growth of cells that destroy normal tissue and body parts in the growth. Some cancers are very aggressive and can spread throughout the body (metastasize) whereas others are slow growing and unlikely to spread throughout the body.

What are the signs of cancer?

The Veterinary Cancer Society and the AVMA have developed a list of 10 common signs to educate pet owners about cancer.

- *Abnormal swelling that persists or continues to grow
- *Sores that do not heal
- *Weight loss
- *Loss of appetite
- *Bleeding or discharge from any body opening
- *Offensive odor

- *Difficulty eating or swallowing
- *Hesitation to exercise or loss of stamina
- *Persistent lameness or stiffness
- *Difficulty breathing, urinating or defecating

How common is cancer in dogs and cats?

Cancer is the most common natural cause of death in dogs and cats in the United States. It is also the most curable of all chronic diseases.

What causes cancer?

The cause of cancer in pet animals, just like in people, is largely unknown. There are certain breeds that tend to get certain types of cancers more often than others, such as large breed dogs and bone tumors. There are also environmental factors, such as exposure to the sun or cigarette smoke that may be associated with increased incidence of cancer. Unfortunately, not enough is known about the cause of cancer and how to prevent it.

Is cancer genetic?

An individual's ability to resist cancer-causing substances in the environment undoubtedly includes a genetic component. For many cancers, inherited patterns are occasionally seen; in some instances the patterns are pronounced. At present, however, the ability to identify the genetic component of cancer risk is limited. As genetic knowledge advances, genetic studies will begin to have a greater relevance for cancer screening and prevention.

Can cancer be treated in animals?

Yes. Cancer is the most curable of chronic diseases. Surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy are three of the most commonly employed treatments. However, only a small amount of animals are actually "cured."

Dr. Hintermeister is a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (Oncology). Dr. Hintermeister is a board-certified Oncologist at the Animal Emergency & Treatment Centers and is available by consultation at AETC's Grayslake and Chicago hospitals.



Animal Emergency & Treatment Centers of Chicago
3927 W. Belmont Avenue, Chicago, IL 60618
P: (773) 516-5800



Animal Emergency & Treatment Centers of Grayslake
1810 E. Belvidere Road, Grayslake, IL 60030
P: (847) 548-5300