

Cancer in Pets

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Cancer is the unrestrained growth of cells that destroy normal tissues and body organs. There are many different types of cancer and each one carries a different prognosis or outcome. Treatment options may include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, pain relief, complementary therapies including nutritional supplements, diet, herbs, or a combination of therapies. Many factors are involved in the decision making process, from the effects of the therapy on your pet, financial considerations, stress on everyone and the long-term prognosis.

With appropriate treatments we aim to slow your pet's deterioration and to give your pet the best quality of life. The course of the disease is often unpredictable. The goals of treatment are to try to prolong life and make your pet as comfortable and happy as possible.

Basic Management

The most important things to watch for is appetite and weight loss. We recommend weigh-ins on a regular basis – the frequency will vary depending on the condition of your pet. If you notice a decrease in appetite we urge you to take your pet into your vet hospital to see if there has been any weight loss.

We recommend semi-annual exams for pets that have been diagnosed with cancer. The frequency of blood tests will depend on how your pet is doing, what other medical conditions are present and what medications are being taken. Generally they are done annually or more frequently if required.

Diet

One of the biggest problems in pets with cancer is cachexia (breakdown of tissues and decreased appetite) with progressive weight loss. Cachexia leads to decreased quality of life, decreased response to treatment and shortened survival time. It is caused by the metabolic alterations to your pet's system as a result of the cancer.

Good quality protein is tasty and easiest for the system to process. High quality proteins include real meat, poultry and fish, and better quality canned food. Simple carbohydrates should be eliminated from the diet if possible – or reduced. Simple carbohydrates include sugar, milk, fruit and kibble (dry pet food). Complex carbohydrates (starchy vegetables) should be reduced in quantity.

Digestive enzymes should be added to the food to improve digestion and absorption to help your pet obtain the maximum nutrients from the food.

Having said that, some pets are fussy with food. Even a lower quality food is better than no food. Please refer to our hand out with tips on increasing palatability of food. If you notice a decrease in appetite that lasts longer than a couple of days please seek veterinary attention.

Pain

Pain management is a crucial part of cancer management. Pain manifests itself in different ways in our pets. Most pets have a much higher pain tolerance than we do or, at least, they complain less. Things to watch for include a change in behaviour (ie. becoming withdrawn, clingy, aggressive, cranky), decrease in appetite, change in elimination habits (ie. urinating or defecating in inappropriate places, or crying or straining when passing urine or stool), and change in posture (ie. walking gingerly, limping, difficulty in getting comfortable).

Conventional Treatment Options

The treatment options vary depending on the type of cancer, the condition of your pet and a number of other factors. These options will be discussed in detail as relevant.

Surgery: We only recommend surgery if there is a good chance of removing enough of the tumor to improve quality of life and perhaps enable adjunctive therapy to work better.

Radiation Therapy: Radiation can be beneficial for certain tumor types, but is not without risks or complications. In most situations where radiation therapy is indicated, treatments are required on a weekly basis for several weeks. It is not available in Manitoba ; the veterinary college in Saskatoon is the closest facility that offers this treatment.

Chemotherapy: This treatment has a good success rate with lymphoma in dogs and cats, and with some other cancers. For many cancers, it has no or little benefit.

Appetite Stimulants: There are a number of different medications that are helpful in increasing your pet's appetite. Weight loss can cause a number of problems including weakness and heart failure. We recommend utilizing appetite stimulants at the first sign of decreased appetite rather than delaying until significant weight loss has occurred. It is much easier to maintain weight then it is to gain it back after it's been lost.

Anti-Nausea Medication: If your pet has excess salivation or intermittent vomiting, then anti-nausea medication will make him feel better and eat more.

Pain Medication: Quality of life is our top priority. There are a number of options for controlling pain. Our goal is to find the one that is most effective with minimal side effects. Using over the counter pain medication without direction of a veterinarian is not recommended and can be harmful to your pet. As with appetite stimulants, we recommend that treatment for pain be started sooner than latter.

Piroxicam (in tablet or liquid form): is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication that is beneficial in patients with some specific cancers. It inhibits the growth of some tumors as well as effectively decreasing pain.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture can play an important role in pain management. It is, however, important to understand that acupuncture will stimulate the system and may cause tumor growth.

Acupuncture is available at Aesops.

Complementary Treatment Options

There are a number of complementary treatment options available. Dr Stogdale will base her recommendations on the individual situation of your pet

Because the supplements are life-long therapy, the administration of supplements must work well for both you and your pet. If your pet is difficult to pill or won't accept a supplement mixed with food these many not be practical.

Digestive Enzymes will help your pet to absorb the maximum amount of nutrition from their food. Prozyme is one that is specifically formulated for cats and dogs. It is a powder that is mixed with food. It is available at Aesops or your veterinarian can order it for you.

Vitamins A, C and E are antioxidants that have a number of anti-cancer effects, including the inhibition of blood vessel growth in tumors, the promotion of healthy collagen, and free radical scavenger

Various herbs are potent antioxidants as well as stabilizing cells, liver protection and other specific actions. The selection of herbs depends on the type of cancer as well as considering the other organs and condition of the patient.

Cell Advance 880 is an antioxidant formula that is available at Aesops. It contains 20 nutrients including vitamins A, C and E. This combines five of the supplements (Vitamins A, C, E, Alpha Lipoic Acid, and Selenium) into one capsule.

Omega 3 (Essential Fatty Acids EPA and DHA) has been shown to help reduce inflammation by promoting the production of natural anti-inflammatory substances in the body. They also help your pet with energy and can slow tumor growth. Dr Stogdale will discuss the sources, dose and administration of Omega 3 oils. There is a separate sheet of information about Omega 3 benefits, sources and administration.

Marijuana oil (a legal form) for pets is a good source of Omega 3s and has the additional advantage of improving appetite. Medi Paws is available from Aesops on special order.

Hoxey or Essiac herbal formulas are sometimes suggested for cancer patients. The herbs in these formulas are antioxidants. There are no conclusive studies to support the use of either. The herbal formulas have a taste that many pets find unpleasant. Homeopathy Hoxey formula has no taste and is available in liquid at Aesops.

When is Veterinary Attention Required?

Please contact your veterinarian if you notice any of the following:

- decrease in appetite
- weight loss
- increase or decrease in drinking or in urinating
- urinating or defecating in an inappropriate location
- straining when passing stool or urine
- stool that is dry or hard or constipation
- vomiting
- change in behaviour (ie. withdrawing, becoming aggressive)
- decrease in energy
- a sore that does not heal
- an unusual odor

Immediate (same day) veterinary attention is required if you notice any of the following:

- if your pet stops drinking and urinating
- if your pet hasn't eaten for 24 hours
- if your pet is extremely lethargic or is having difficulty walking
- if your pet is in pain
- if your pet vomits more than 3 times in a 24 hour period.

Quality of Life

Our primary goal is to maintain quality of life and dignity for your pet. Quality of life is difficult to measure and the criteria varies between pets. Some of the common factors to take into consideration are appetite, activity and energy level, grooming habits and social interactions.

When your pet's quality of life is no longer adequate and treatment options have been exhausted, humane euthanasia is recommended. Dr Stogdale always recommends sedating the pet prior to the euthanasia injection. Many people want to be present at the time of euthanasia, whereas others do not. Your veterinarian will respect your wishes. The concern is to be sensitive to your desires and provide a dignified and painless end for your furry family member that you have done so much to befriend.