

10 Warning Signs of Cancer in Dogs and Cats

Here's what to watch for and when to turn to your veterinarian.

By Mary Fuller, DVM

Cancer: It's not a word you want to hear in the same sentence with your pet's name. But around 6 million dogs and 6 million cats in the United States will be diagnosed with cancer this year, according to the Animal Cancer Foundation.* That's why, as part of National Pet Cancer Awareness Month this November, we're sharing some important tips to help you and your pet.

TRY NOT TO PANIC

As with many other diseases, early diagnosis and intervention are crucial. Cancer in dogs and cats can be well managed in many cases, and some types of skin cancer, for example, may even be curable if caught in the early stages (before they spread to other areas of the body).

"If the owner brings the presence of a skin mass to the attention of his or her veterinarian, it can be removed while small and localized," according to Dr. Ann Hohenhaus, a board-certified veterinary oncologist (cancer specialist) at the Animal Medical Center in New York City.

BE VIGILANT

The signs can vary depending on the type and stage of cancer and the organs or tissues affected. Many other health conditions can cause similar signs, so if you notice one, it doesn't automatically mean your pet has cancer. Still, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian if your dog or cat exhibits any of the following signs.



1 Changing skin lumps or bumps. Run your hands over your pet's skin regularly, feeling for lumps that continue to grow, bumps that change in shape or texture, and wounds that don't heal. Mast cell tumors, common in dogs, may bleed periodically and seem to come and go over time.

In female pets, especially those who weren't spayed early, make sure you regularly feel around the nipples on the chest and abdomen. Nodules or lumps under the skin can be signs of mammary (breast) cancer. Male pets can also get breast cancer, although it's less common.

2 Swollen lymph nodes. In dogs, these are a common sign of lymphoma (a cancer of the lymphatic system). Although you probably won't notice the swelling visually, you may be able to feel chains of swollen nodes under the jaw and chin and behind the knees. At your pet's next wellness visit, you can ask your vet to show you where to feel your pet's lymph nodes. Feeling them when they're normal can help you notice if they seem swollen later on.

3 Chronic vomiting or diarrhea. Some cancers can affect the stomach and intestines and may result in persistent vomiting and/or diarrhea or

bloody stools. These signs merit a trip to the veterinarian, especially because lymphoma tends to affect the digestive system in cats.

4 Abnormal mouth odor or difficulty chewing. Although these can be common signs of dental disease, pets can develop tumors in their mouths as well. Other signs of an oral tumor (or dental disease) may include facial swelling, excessive drooling, and dropping food from the mouth. Cats often develop squamous cell carcinomas in their mouths that may bleed and make it difficult to chew or swallow food. In dogs, oral melanomas are common and often black in color.

5 Weight loss or reduced appetite. If possible, try to weigh your pet every month or so. Pets who continually lose weight over time, especially when they aren't on a weight loss diet, should visit their veterinarian.

6 Unusual bleeding. Bleeding from the nose, mouth, or other orifices, including blood in the urine (which can cause reddish- or pink-tinged urine), may be cause for concern.

7 Coughing or difficulty breathing. These can certainly be signs of

other conditions, but a persistent, dry cough and trouble breathing could be signs of cancer (particularly cancer that has spread from another part of the body). Your veterinarian may recommend a chest x-ray and other diagnostic tests.

8 Lameness, limb swelling, or limping. Although these signs are common in several conditions, they could indicate osteosarcoma, a cancer that affects the bones. Limping can also be caused by malignant (cancerous) tumors around the nail beds, such as melanoma in dogs. In these cases, you may notice a broken nail and swelling or bleeding where the nail meets the skin. If you notice limping, pronounced swelling, or pain in any limb, see your veterinarian.

9 Straining to urinate. This may be a sign of a urinary tract infection or bladder stones, but it could happen with bladder cancer too. Don't delay if your pet is having trouble urinating or is only passing a few droplets of urine: A trip to the vet is in order!

10 Lethargy or decreased activity. Avoid writing off a lack of energy as a normal sign of aging. Pets who lose interest in playing, going for walks, and

participating in other activities—including cats who hide and avoid human interaction—could be showing signs that something's wrong.

WORK AS A TEAM

If your pet is diagnosed with cancer, your veterinarian may recommend a consultation with a veterinary oncologist. Your pet's prognosis (outcome) will differ depending on your pet's overall health, the type of cancer, available treatment options, and how early the cancer is caught. Your veterinary team may discuss different treatment options, such as surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation.

Even if the cancer can't be cured, your veterinary team can typically take steps to relieve pain, enhance quality of life, and help keep your pet as comfortable as possible. By working with your veterinarian and veterinary oncologist, you can develop a plan that's right for your pet and your family.

Dr. Mary Fuller is a freelance writer specializing in pet parent and veterinary communications. When not hiking with her two Shiba Inus, Iris and Arlo, she takes bicycle trips in far-off places.

*Animal Cancer Foundation. Questions and answers. acfoundation.org/faqs. Accessed September 15, 2017.

After the Diagnosis: Not Sure What to Expect?

Talk to your vet. He or she can help alleviate your concerns and answer your questions.

For instance, one thing you may not realize about cancer in pets is that although dogs and cats may experience some of the same side effects to treatment as humans, it's usually to a lesser degree, according to Dr. Hohenhaus. As an example, she explains that most pets receiving chemotherapy have very minimal hair loss compared with humans.

Your veterinarian and your veterinary team are there to not only treat your pet but also help you during the process. Don't be afraid to reach out.



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