

UNDER THE WEATHER

Cancer: Myths and the Truth

So many years in practice, and one of the hardest things for me to do is to break bad news. There is never a good way of doing it, and it is tough to see the inevitable sorrow on the faces of pet parents. Cancer is a dreaded disease which brings a pall of gloom with it. But over the years, things have changed, medicine has taken huge leaps, and we as vets can honestly offer hope to pet parents if their pet has been diagnosed with cancer.

First the facts: Cancer is one of the leading causes of death in dogs over 10 years of age. Now let me bust a myth – cancer is not caused by any lifestyle changes, including diet. A lot of people attribute non vegetarian food or prepared dog food to cancer. The truth is that we see as many dogs on vegetarian or home-made diets who have cancer. So why are we seeing so many cases? Is the incidence on the rise? I believe not. I think this is because more and more people are becoming aware of their pet's health, regular health checkups are more common, and people do not hesitate to do diagnostic work-ups before it is too late. So more than incidence, it's the diagnosis that has picked up.

What are the warning signs of cancer in your pet? Depending on the type of cancer and its location, symptoms may vary. Any lumps or bumps in the body should not be ignored. Bring it to the attention of your vet immediately who will then guide you about the right course of action. Observe. Do a needle biopsy or do a full surgical excision biopsy. Medicine is not an exact science, and your vet will use his/her judgement to decide whether the lump feels benign (non-cancerous) or malignant (cancerous) and whether immediate intervention is necessary. As your pet grows older, it is a good idea to check regularly for any lumps felt on the body. It is a good idea to do this while bathing your dog, since masses are more visible when the pet is wet. Intact (unsterilised) females also have a high incidence of mammary tumours, so they should be checked for the same.

Weight loss is another common symptom of cancer. Pet parents might see their pet losing weight in spite of eating the



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same quantity of food, this could be due to a host of other causes (diabetes, worms etc), but cancer should be ruled out.

Tumours on the skin or mucous membranes, non-healing ulcers could be due to skin cancer like mast cell tumours, melanomas or squamous cell carcinomas. Lymph node enlargement (below the jaw, at the back of the thigh) can be because of malignant lymphoma. Lethargy, disorientation or seizures may be due to brain tumours (and yes, we do diagnose and treat those, with MRI and radiation facilities being made available for pets). Any abnormal bleeding from the urine, stool or mouth may be indicative of cancer in those areas.

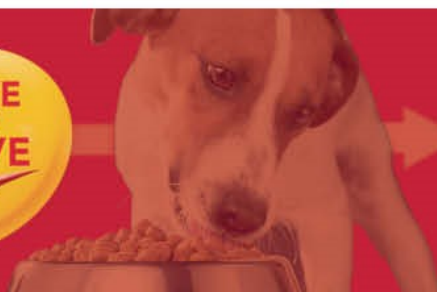
What are the causes of cancer? Genetics is thought to be one of the most common cause, and environmental and hormonal factors are also thought to contribute.

Is there anything you can do prevent cancer? Not in most cancers, but mammary tumours can be avoided if you spay your female pet early (around six months of age). If you are not planning to breed from your pet, this is one of the most important things you can do to save her from getting mammary tumours, commonly seen in older females. In all other cancers, early detection and prompt treatment will give your pet a good chance of beating the disease.

What about treatment? Response to treatment depends a lot on how soon the cancer is detected and treated. Surgical excision is the best choice for most tumours. This may be followed by chemotherapy and/or radiation. Once a tumour is removed, it is sent for histopathology. The histopathology, along with ultrasonography, and other tests including CT scan, helps in 'staging' the cancer. Early stage cancers respond well to treatment. I have several patients who've survived cancer and now live normal lives several years after detection. A high level of awareness from the pet parent, that's all that's needed.



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