

Cancer

Cancer treatment and diagnosis in pets has made many advances over the last few years. Our facilities at Pride Veterinary Centre offer a number of treatment and diagnosis options for pet cancer care in addition to the services we already offer. We feel passionately that pets deserve the best options available which is one of the reasons we have developed our Oncology service.



Cancer as a diagnosis, especially in our older pets, is all too common and for many pet owners it is a huge concern, naturally associated with many questions: How long does my pet have to live?, is there anything that I could have done to prevent this?, is there anything that I can do to make life better for my pet?, can I do something to keep my pet? We shed some light on the treatment options for animals that have been diagnosed with cancer and also to try and dismiss some of the myths associated with the use of chemotherapy in animals.

What is Cancer?

Cancer is when the cells in the body divide and grow without the normal regulatory controls, resulting in an abnormal mass of tissue. The clump of expanding cells is known as a tumour and there are many types of tumour depending on the type of body cell where the cancer started. Tumours are divided into two major types: benign and malignant. Benign tumours grow slowly; they do not spread and do not invade other tissues. They may however cause local problems due to compression of nearby tissues, or they may result in unsightly lumps.

Benign tumours can often be cured by surgical removal providing that sufficient margins around the tumour are taken. **Malignant tumours** are significantly more concerning and are really what we all know as “cancer”. They tend to grow quickly without any organisation and invade nearby tissues and organs which can cause organ damage and potentially organ failure. Malignant tumours often have the capacity to spread around the body in a process known as metastasis. This involves cells from the primary tumour splitting off and spreading in the blood or lymphatic systems to set up other secondary tumours. Examples of some common malignant tumours that we see in our patients include: leukaemia, a cancer of the bone marrow; lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system; osteosarcoma, a cancer of the bone; and haemangiosarcoma, a cancer of the blood often found in spleens in hearts. If your pet is diagnosed with any of these conditions we will always discuss all treatment options available to ensure the best option is decided upon for you and your pet.

Diagnosis

Cancer is usually diagnosed by biopsy. This is where a small segment of a suspected cancerous lump is removed and sent to a laboratory for the cells to be examined. Often a biopsy is taken first, prior to mass removal, as once a mass has been removed without the necessary margins the chances of “curing” the cancer with further surgery are minimal.

Once cancer has been diagnosed we need to investigate further to see if it has spread. This is done with a full blood test, imaging (abdominal ultrasound and chest-xrays) and investigations of the body’s lymph nodes (especially when lymphoma is suspected). Following this initial evaluation of the cancer one of our vets on the medicine team will invite you in to discuss the treatment options available to your pet. Time will be devoted at this initial consultation to ensure that you are aware and understand all the treatment options available and that all your questions have been answered.



Treatment

Treatment options typically involve either surgery or chemotherapy, or a combination of the two. If chemotherapy is decided upon owners must appreciate that the aim of chemotherapy in animals is not to “cure” the cancer per se, but to extend life as much possible without compromising quality of life. As such chemotherapy dosages used in animals are lower than that used in people, as this dramatically reduces side-effects. Only one in five animals show any side-effects and of these mild nausea, loss of appetite and diarrhoea are the most common. We routinely give medication to prevent sickness and we can treat if not reduce diarrhoea if it occurs. Hair loss is very uncommon in animals. It is also worth remembering that pets are not aware of the implications of their diagnosis so do not suffer the same emotional distress that we do when we are presented with a difficult diagnosis.

At each visit your pet will have a thorough clinical examination and a blood test prior to any chemotherapy. The examination is to ensure that your pet appears healthy enough to receive chemotherapy and the blood test is to ensure that there are enough white blood cells (part of the immune system) present prior to giving chemotherapy. If the number of white blood cells is very low we normally delay the treatment for three to five days.

At Pride Veterinary Centre, we have excellent treatment and diagnostic options available making this one of the premier sites for pet cancer care. Our new imaging facilities include CT and MRI which greatly help in diagnosis. We also have a dedicated chemotherapy ward available as well as a radioiodine ward for treating hyperthyroidism in cats which is a first in this area. We work alongside clinicians from Nottingham University Veterinary School to add to our already highly trained medical team.

We hope that this article has shed some light on the treatment options for cancer and cleared up some of the myths associated with chemotherapy and treating cancer in pets. Just because your pet has been diagnosed with cancer does not mean that it's the end of the line and should you wish to discuss your animal's disease then please do not hesitate to contact us. We are more than happy to go through any of your concerns and please feel free to ask us anything – we are here to help you and your pet.

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Scarsdale Vets
Pride Veterinary Centre
Riverside Road
Derby DE24 8HX
Telephone: 01332 678333
www.scarsdalevets.com

