

The Dreaded 'C' Word

Cancer in Our Pets

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We've all been there. You go to one of our wonderful, unofficial "dog parks" here on the Hill (that's another story) and notice you haven't seen that yellow lab you used to see every evening. Or that greyhound with three legs. It's happened to all of us. And it seems to be happening more and more to our animal family, too. That dreaded word "cancer."

In reality, cancer is nothing new to our pets, any more than it was a new scourge of 20th century humanity. In fact, animals get cancers at about the same rates we do. The last century just happened to be the time we discovered medicine and real diagnostics. Same for our animals who are healthier than ever before, eating better food and living longer lives – long enough to develop chronic illnesses. Among these, more heart disease, more arthritis and yes, more cancer.

Like us, animals get more chronic diseases as they age, with cancer accounting for nearly half of all deaths in older animals. This is the dreaded word I hate to say in the exam room. In actuality, though, many cancers are treatable, some even curable. Treatment depends on the type of tumor, its location, and its grade or stage. Just like for us.

But diagnosis is first. And that's where our friends at our wonderful clinics on the Hill come in. As I've said before in this series, you have to start with your own general practice veterinarian and have a close, honest working relationship with him or her. Your vet will then be able to steer you to the right specialist if you need one and be your guide throughout treatment.

Diagnosis can start with something as simple as a non-painful needle aspirate, or sometimes a real biopsy under anesthesia needs to be done. Finally, an ultrasound or CT scan may be indicated. Because the hardest thing is for your vet to have to "guess" what that lump is, whether on the skin, in a lymph node or in the body. Without a diagnosis, it's impossible to know what that mass will do.

After diagnosis, where do you go? Many general practitioners treat these themselves. But if you need a specialist, you're in luck. In our area alone, there are no less than six advanced specialty hospitals with experts ranging from cardiologists to neurologists, and yes, oncologists. Many of these specialties even have specialists. For instance, you might need a medical oncologist to treat your dog's cancer with chemotherapy. But you'll need a radiation oncologist if you go the radiation route. Just like for us.

A few years ago, I was that person at Lincoln Park with the three legged dog. Lucy was my second greyhound with three legs, both dogs getting bone cancer in the middle of their lives. Sadly, very common for that breed. For both dogs, I did what I thought was best for them. For Sophie, treatment paid off big time – she lived for five more years to her natural old age of 14. In the meantime, she got to see national parks and even went to Mount Rushmore twice! Lucy, though, wasn't so lucky. Same disease, same treatment, very different outcome. She only lived about a year after diagnosis. Was this enough to justify treatment? I still struggle with that but wouldn't have done anything different in the end.

It's a personal decision. And there are many variables. Cost of treatment, statistical prognosis, and most important, the morbidity or toll it will take on your pet. Animals tolerate surgery and chemo much better than we do, but that's not to say it doesn't affect them, because it does. And it will affect you too. Multiple trips to your vet, or a specialist, complications that can arise, and the cost of all of the above. But if you do choose to go ahead with cancer treatment, animals can do pretty well and, like my Sophie, live to old age in spite of a very scary diagnosis.

If you go the chemo route, things are a little different for pets. I always tell clients who are facing the chemo decision that we'll only treat if their animal never, ever knows they are being treated. If it hurts, or makes them sick, we stop. That's where it's so very different than for us humans. It's just a treatment option. If it becomes a bad one, it's over. And often it's not so bad. Actually, some dogs and cats even seem better after chemo – they have more energy and an improved appetite. The point is, never let them know they're sick and never let them know they're in treatment.

Many clients ask how their pet got cancer, and if they could have prevented it. The answer is that cancer is a fact of life. And prevention, for animals who are not as self destructive as we are, is rare. With the exception of mammary cancers or testicular tumors, both of which are nearly non-existent if your pet is spayed or neutered early (spay before she ever, ever goes into heat!), most cancers in pets are simply not preventable. There are rare exceptions, such as certain carcinomas on the ears of cats, which might be triggered by a white-eared cat going out in strong sunlight, but these are rare. Dogs and cats don't smoke, after all.

So with all the great nutrition, conscientious care and modern medicine we can now offer, these are the best of times for our animals. But they can seem the worst of times if you have a pet diagnosed with cancer. The key is not to fear the diagnosis. Partner with your vet to devise a realistic and practical, humane and compassionate treatment plan for your dog or cat. It can pay off in so many more cases than you would ever imagine.



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