

Peter Segall's November Villager article

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by Peter Segall, DVM

Cancer: Rising in Animals

A question I'm hearing more and more: Can animals get cancer like we do? The answer is yes, and we may be seeing an increase. Both cats and dogs are being diagnosed with cancer in various parts of their bodies. What is causing the increase? Can it be genetics? Food? Environmental pollution? Who knows? Scientists are spending billions on research to try and find the answers. I want to discuss the relevant facts about various malignancies that I see in my patients that may be interesting to my readers.

Viruses can cause cancer, leukemia in cats being a prime example. We used to see cats that faded away from weight loss and/or tumors and called it sick cat syndrome. It was finally shown that a set of viruses: feline leukemia and feline lymph sarcoma virus were causing these illnesses. Feline leukemia attacked the white blood cells in the bone marrow. Death of these cells caused anemia, weakness and eventual death. There are no good treatments. The lymph sarcoma virus actually caused a mass, usually in the chest, kidneys or GI tract. Masses in the chest resulted in fluid formation; constricting the lungs and causing difficulty breathing. Lymph sarcoma of the kidney resulted in kidney failure and in the GI tract, diarrhea and weight loss. There is some chemotherapy, which may help some cats live up to a year.

The most common malignancies we see are skin tumors. With each yearly visit we search your pet for lumps and bumps. These can be on the surface of the skin and can be felt moving under it. All of us have probably experienced some skin bumps and may have been concerned about them; these masses can either be benign or malignant. Some times we can tell just by looking that a lump is benign. Years of experience allow us to do this. There are papillomas and cysts, which are so characteristic in look and feel that diagnosis without biopsy is reasonable. The majority of masses, however, will need more work to know what they are. Many times, even without a local, we can use a needled syringe to get enough cells for a pathologist to identify whether we are dealing with cancer or not. Sometimes we can't do a simple needle biopsy and may need sedation anesthesia to get a good piece for biopsy. Some cancers are solitary and do not spread. Those types that do metastasize will require chest x-rays

etc. to look for the spread to other organs such as the lungs. Benign tumors many times do not have to be removed. Many dogs have multiple lipomas, benign tumors of fat, which are under the skin, very smooth and movable.

One cancer, which I believe may have genetic origins, is lymphatic cancer in dogs, especially golden retrievers. Dogs will come to the office with swollen lymph nodes, usually all the external nodes are involved. The glands under the neck and head are usually what owners feel first. This disease if untreated, will kill a dog within two months. Treating with steroids will double this and chemotherapy will keep some dogs alive for as long as three years. My feeling about the genetic basis in this breed is strengthened by the fact that they are hugely over represented among my lymphatic cancer patients. Research is being done to identify the line that carries the disease.

Animals get cancer of every part of their bodies as do humans and in many cases (unfortunately at great expense) they can be treated with surgery, radiation and/or chemotherapy.

As many of you now know, I have moved from our Valley Cottage office to our Pomona office on Route 202 in Pomona. I am working with pleasant and competent people and am finding it easy to settle in.

Annie is beginning to show that she is over 10 years of age. She (and I) are a little slower on walks, with a little more panting from both of us. She wakes up and needs a little time to shake the kinks out. We will, God willing, age well together, Laura and I, Oliver and Annie. Oliver, though over 10 as well, still streaks through the house and jumps as high as ever. He is still stealing Laura's tissues from her pocketbook at night and playing soccer with the package.

Keep warm.

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