



# Cancer:

## What Pet Owners Need to Know

### Ten Most Common Signs of Cancer in Small Animals

1. Abnormal swellings that persist or continue to grow
2. Sores that do not heal
3. Weight loss
4. Loss of appetite
5. Bleeding or discharge from any body opening
6. Offensive odor
7. Difficulty eating or swallowing
8. Hesitation to exercise or loss of stamina
9. Persistent lameness or stiffness
10. Difficulty breathing, urinating, or defecating

### What is Cancer?

The word *cancer* refers to cells in the body that grow out of control. Tumor cells can grow very fast, eventually crowding out normal cells. They can also spread to other part of the body damaging entire systems of the body.

Cancer can occur in any cell if the DNA is damaged. Normally DNA controls cell functions, including when the cells reproduce and die. When DNA is damaged, cells can divide rapidly and outlive normal cells. Most of the time, the body's immune system recognizes these damaged cells and destroys them. However, if this normal process does not happen, a *tumor* can grow.

A tumor is a mass, or collection, of cells. Tumors can be benign or malignant.

- Benign tumors are noncancerous. They can grow, but they do not invade surrounding tissues or travel to other areas of the body. They usually cause a problem only if their location and size interfere with other nearby structures.
- Malignant tumors are cancerous. Very different from normal cells, cancer cells can invade nearby tissue. They also can travel to areas away from the original site (primary) and grow in other parts of the body. This is called *metastasis*.

### **Why does Cancer Occur?**

The reason pets develop cancer is not well understood. Genetics can play an important role, as can environment. But there may be one or more unknown reasons why your pet has cancer. Early detection and treatment are the best ways to manage cancer in pets.

### **How is Cancer Diagnosed?**

Strong circumstantial evidence of cancer can be attained from radiographs, blood tests, ultrasonography, the pet's physical examination, and medical history. Most cancers, however, will require some form of biopsy (a removal of a piece of tissue) for confirmation that cancer exists. A biopsy also allows us to grade the level of severity from benign to aggressively malignant.

### **How is a Treatment Course Decided?**

Cancer treatments vary depending upon a few main factors:

- The type of cancer
- The stage of the cancer
- The patient's overall condition
- The goal of the treatment

The goals of cancer treatment also vary. Not all goals are achievable for every type of cancer.

- Cure
- Prolong pet's life (good quality)
- Reduce unwanted symptoms or effects of the cancer

Your pet's doctor may recommend one or more treatments to achieve the goals. Different treatment options include chemotherapy, surgery, radiation therapy, cryosurgery (freezing,) hyperthermia (heating,) or immunotherapy.

### **What is the Success Rate?**

This strongly depends upon the type and extent of the cancer, as well as the aggressiveness of therapy. Some cancers can be cured and almost all patients can be helped to some degree.

### **Resources for More Information**

The Hope Center  
American Veterinary Medical Association  
American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine  
Veterinary Cancer Society

[www.hopecentervet.com](http://www.hopecentervet.com)  
[www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org)  
[www.acvim.org](http://www.acvim.org)  
[www.vetcancersociety.org](http://www.vetcancersociety.org)