

Cancer in Pets

A client recently asked me why more and more dogs and cats are being diagnosed with cancer, and she was convinced that it was the "stuff" they put into modern dog foods. Surprisingly, this is the opinion held by many pet owners. I find it hard to comprehend why a food company would produce a product that reduces the number of clients that use it, and would think that it is in the food company's best interest to keep its users alive. So why are more pets being diagnosed with cancer? This question is not easy to answer since the cause of most cancers is still not completely understood, but there are a few definite reasons as to why cancer is more common. The first is that Veterinary practices have access to sophisticated equipment that was rare 10-15 years ago. X-ray machines, ultrasound machines and CT/MRI are quite routinely used in Veterinary practice and as a consequence more cancer is diagnosed that would have been missed in the past. Many a German Shepherd Dog that died "of old age" in the bottom of the garden, probably died of splenic cancer (to which they are predisposed), which was undiagnosed because ultrasound was a rarity in practice. Interestingly, diseases tend to become more common after they are diagnosed a few times because the physician begins to suspect them and look for them and this is certainly true in veterinary oncology.

Another reason for an increasing incidence in pet cancers is the fact that dogs and cats are living longer than they used to on average. Cancer incidence increases as we age, since damage to the cells' machinery accumulates over the cells life-span. Improved nutrition, vaccination and modern medicines have dramatically lengthened the longevity of our pets who would have died of communicable diseases or poor nutrition in the past. Genetics have also been implicated in cancer, and this is evident in veterinary medicine where certain breeds are more predisposed to cancer than others for example Boxers are predisposed to Mast Cell Tumours. Because pure breeds are more prone to cancer the incidence of cancer increases as people take on pure bred pets where they may have just adopted a good old mongrel in the past!

The good news Vets are becoming more successful at managing cancer in the pet population. The key in managing cancer successfully is early diagnosis. Many Vet practices are equipped with hi-tech x-ray and ultrasound machines. All Senior pets (pets over 7) should be screened for cancer (chest x-rays and abdominal ultrasound). This should be done yearly because when your pet turns 8 he/she is about 7 years older than the previous year. Most clients are not doing this for many reasons including: reluctance to have cancer diagnosed/treated, poor awareness and cost implications. At HVH we are equipped with a full set of diagnostic equipment and novel drugs to treat and manage pet cancer – and our goal is to provide quality of life. Many owners who have experienced cancer and chemo are reluctant to have their pets treated due to their own experiences. In veterinary medicine the goal of cancer care is to keep animals free of pain and nausea, and we seldom encounter the side effects seen routinely in human medicine.

Please feel free to contact us if you have any queries about pet cancers, or would like to see us regarding this or any other problem in your pet.