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## Cancer

Cancer. Many of us hear the word and are immediately fearful. We remember the worst personal experiences concerning loved ones with cancer. Whether it is us personally or a loved one or a beloved non-human member of our family we often associate cancer with the worst possible outcome. But the reality is far different.

Many types of cancer, if detected and treated early in their course, can be among the most curable and treatable of diseases. The key is early intervention. In many cases surgery alone may be curative. In other cases chemotherapy or radiation treatment may be warranted. Once a diagnosis of cancer is made we must then open our minds to possibilities and not allow preconceived ideas of what treatment will entail cloud our judgement.

Let us first focus on the options for diagnosis and treatment. Often the first recommendation is a biopsy to determine the specific type of cancer involved. A biopsy may consist of removing a small sample of the tumor for the pathologist to exam microscopically. In many cases a procedure called an excisional biopsy may be recommended. This involves attempting to remove the entire tumor and nearby tissue in hopes of removing the tumor entirely with one surgery. This procedure is recommended when only one solitary tumor is present.

In many cases it may be important to see if the cancer show evidence that it has spread elsewhere before any surgery is performed. This may involve taking radiographs of the patient's chest or abdomen to search for other tumor evidence or further bloodwork. It may also involve removing lymph nodes near the main tumor site for submission to the pathologist. It is important to stage the cancer to see if it has already spread elsewhere. Once the tumor has been submitted to a pathologist and the type of cancer is identified the next step may be

recommended chemotherapy, radiation, other treatment involving oral medications, etc. In many cases no further treatment is necessary at all. In all stages of cancer treatment it is important to remember that we will follow established "commandments" of cancer treatment.

The first commandment is that we will not let your friend hurt. Pain medication is an integral part of cancer treatment as it is for any surgical procedure. Chemotherapy does not usually warrant any pain medication but the cancer itself may warrant pain medications while it is being treated. Most pain medications for dogs and cats do a very good job of dealing with pain.

Second, we will not let the patient vomit or have diarrhea if possible. Most of the chemotherapy drugs we use will attack rapidly dividing cells in the body and the lining of the intestines is one of the most rapidly dividing cellular areas in the body. Most chemotherapy patients have times when their appetite may be decreased for a few days during certain treatment times. But any potential vomiting or diarrhea can usually be counteracted with appropriate medications.

Third, we will not let the patient starve. If the patient isn't eating well there are other medications that will aid to increase the appetite and decrease nausea. Most of the time, if the nausea associated with chemotherapy is controlled the patient will eat on their own. Once again, they may have some periods of decreased appetite but these periods are usually very short term. In some cases it may be necessary to syringe feed the patient for a few days at a time while they are recovering from the effects of chemotherapy. Please keep in mind this is not "force feeding". Syringe feeding is simply a way to get nutrition into a patient that is reluctant to eat. And most patients take syringe feeding very well.

With chemotherapy it is important to understand that dogs and cats usually do not experience the same side effects as humans do. Dogs and cats do not lose their hair the way people do. Cats may lose their whiskers and shaved areas may be very slow to grow back but they do not go bald. Also, as mentioned earlier, even though we are using many of the same chemotherapy drugs used in humans our patients usually do not experience the vomiting, diarrhea, and nausea to the degree that humans do. And when they do have any side effects from chemotherapy we can usually treat those side effects.

In many cases surgery and chemotherapy offer a very good quality of life during treatment. The patients often are feeling better soon after surgery or after a round or two of chemotherapy. Clients are often surprised at how well the

patient does. And surgery and chemotherapy can offer the possibility of cure or months or years of very good quality of life. And for anyone reluctant to give their pet chemotherapy we recommend keeping an open mind. Realize that no one is locked into giving a complete course of chemotherapy. Some patients cannot tolerate the drugs. And although it is uncommon for us to not be able to use any drug against a given cancer it does occasionally happen. But for those reluctant to even consider chemotherapy we offer a simple suggestion. Just try a round or two for your pet. If you don't like it - and that is uncommon - then you can stop any time. You really have little to lose and potentially a great deal to gain.

Cancer can be very rewarding to treat. If diagnosed early many forms of cancer can potentially be cured. Removing a small tumor that hasn't spread anywhere else usually means many more years with your canine or feline friend. Some of the saddest cases we see involve people who wait too long to bring their dog or cat in to see us. They sometimes wait until the tumor is too big to remove or has spread to such a degree that chemotherapy is unlikely to help. Such cases are difficult because they are so unnecessary. Never assume the worst until all of the known information is gathered and the options presented. People are more often pleasantly surprised at how well their pet does with treatment and how much better they feel.