

The Big C

By George Cuellar, DVM, Diplomate ABVP C/F

Cancer. This word conjures up so much sadness, fear, and struggle. This is the word all my clients hope I don't use. Some will ask me, "Do you think it's cancer?" Every small lump, or mass, or discoloration is looked at like it might be the end. I have stopped using that word. It does not help and it scares my clients. I use other words like mass, tumor, growth, lump, and neoplasia. These all mean the same thing, cancer. I am convinced that the fear of cancer stems from a lack of understanding of what exactly is cancer? What types of cancer are there and are some better than others? Are some cancers curable? Are some cancers treatable? Are some cancers not really a problem and should be just left alone? The answer to all is, "Yes".

What is cancer? Cancer is uncontrolled growth. That's it. Very simply it means that for some reason cells or a group of cells just grows out of control. The usual mechanism to keep cells in sheets does not exist and these cells grow rapidly. As they grow they push out normal tissue replacing it with cancer tissue. This pushes out the normal cells, normal architecture, and normal function until organs fail. Any tissue in the body such as skin, bone, liver, lung, muscle, kidney, heart, and sinew can become cancerous. The rapid growth of cancer robs the body of energy as everything from the body is redirected by the cancer for its growth. This causes dramatic weight loss.

What types of cancer are there? All cancers are not bad. All cancers do not cause death. Cancers can only be diagnosed by examining cells under the microscope by people trained in pathology. They are looking at cells, a procedure called cytology, or pieces of tissue, a procedure called biopsy. . There are two types of cancer, benign and malignant. They are completely different. Benign cancers tend to grow locally where they form and do not spread to other areas. Malignant cancers have the ability to throw off chunks of cells into circulation that can grow in other parts of the body. We call this metastasis. Metastasis from malignant tumors is the form of cancer we all fear. It is the one that will limit life. It is the one that is rarely curable. Benign cancers (masses, lumps, tumors) do not spread and can often be cured with surgery. With some types, like fatty tumors, we may do nothing at all. Fatty tumors are cancer. It is a cancer of fat cells that are benign. They do not spread, but can grow rather large. Some are removed and some are not. Removal is usually curative.

Whenever we see a lump or mass there are many things it can be. It can be an infection by bacteria or fungus, it can be a cyst, it can be a localized inflammation, or it can be a tumor. If it is cancer, we need to know what cell type it is and if it is benign or malignant. Doing a needle cytology is the easiest procedure and it is about 85% accurate in diagnosing cell type. A biopsy usually requires sedation or anesthesia to remove a piece or all of the tumor for submission and this is close to 100% accurate to tell us cell type, malignant potential, and treatment suggestions. Biopsy is always the best.

Can cancer be cured? Absolutely! Both malignant and benign cancers can be cured with surgery. Surgery is the only cure for most cancer in pets. Removing the tumor by veterinarians who understand the complexity of cancer surgery and adhering to the proper surgical borders is essential. That means we need to take the tumor off with enough normal tissue around it that no cancer cells are left behind to regrow. This can mean a long surgery, potentially big scars, and, in some, a prolonged recovery.

If cancers cannot be cured, can they be treated? Again, the answer is "yes". Some cancers cannot be removed surgically for many reasons. Some cancers can be removed but have likely spread by the time removal is done. In these situations, cancer treatments are needed. The main cancer treatments are chemotherapy, radiation, and immune types of therapy. These are applied in many ways with many combinations and should be done under the guidance of a specialist that deals with cancer. We call these specialists Oncologists.

Are some cancers not worth removing surgically because they will never cause a problem and can be left alone? The most common types we see at our hospital are lipomas or fatty tumors. We recommend small and midsize lipomas that are not causing problems be left alone.

What do I do if I find a lump on my dog? The first thing is to get it checked by your veterinarian. Sometime lumps can be felt at home and then cannot be located during a physical examination. This is frustrating for all since we know that as soon as we get home we will find it! My advice is to take lipstick and mark the area over and around the tumor. This non-toxic approach makes tumors findable while the area is still washable. I did relay this technique to one of my clients that came in with their Cocker Spaniel covered with circles of lipstick. While appropriate it was hysterical and brought new meaning to the phrase "lipstick on a ...!" Once a tumor is located, we can assess the situation. Some masses are so common that from experience we know what they are and can advise directly. Any tumor that cannot be identified with inspection alone should be sampled. These should have needle cytology sent to a lab or done in the clinic. Some experienced veterinarians still read their own slides. If the report returns indicating that the tumor is potentially dangerous, it should be removed with large borders and then sent to the lab for biopsy. The biopsy tells us exactly what the mass is and if our borders are clean meaning the excision is complete.

Next time a bump appears or is newly noted on a pet stop and take a breath. Get out the lipstick and mark the area. Calmly call your veterinarian and have it checked. It may be cancer but that in and of itself is meaningless. We need to know a lot more before we worry. If there is ever a doubt about what to do and the mass is removable then have it removed. Sometimes thus is the best for peace of mind.

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