

Chemotherapy for Senior Dogs

Making the right decision is difficult when it comes to older dogs and cancer.

By Jon Geller, DVM

Q: Our 14-year-old Border Collie was just diagnosed with mediastinal lymphoma after collapsing several times while running. Our veterinarian gave us the option of an MRI and chemotherapy, but given the poor prognosis, we have chosen just to give her prednisone to keep her comfortable. She still goes on daily walks with us and enjoys her food, but I know she is uncomfortable when she lies down as she whines a great deal before settling into sleep. Do you think we are making the right decision not to pursue chemo with a senior dog?

A: These end-of-life issues lead to some very difficult decisions for dog owners. We see many of these cases after-hours because owners are so concerned about whether their dogs are suffering.

Chemotherapy is very hard on people and dogs, and anyone who has experienced it firsthand is familiar with the ups and downs.

One of the hard realities to consider is that, at 14, life expectancy is very limited. If I were your veterinarian, I would be working closely with you to keep your Border Collie as comfortable as possible at home, creating a hospice-like environment.

Pain management with drugs would be crucial. Ask your vet to prescribe some pain-relieving drugs to help make your dog more comfortable. I would encourage you to continue taking her on walks, but keep them very short. Offer the best food possible, and make sure she has a very comfortable bed to rest in. Multiple trips to the veterinary hospital are not something your dog would probably look forward to, and it is very questionable whether the benefits would even be significant.

Jon Geller, DVM