

Cancer Awareness in Dogs

Early identification and treatment can help your dog beat cancer.

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Knowing that your pet is at high risk for developing cancer can be beneficial, and knowing the signs of cancer is even better. What may surprise you is that the symptoms of cancer in dogs and cats are usually the same as in people. And early detection is vital. A 9-year-old Labrador Retriever named Max adopted John Cline, a certified public accountant, a few years ago. "Max would get soft lumps that came and went. One day, during the height of tax season, I was petting him and I felt a lump. It was hard," recalls John. "I had lost my mother to cancer, so despite my hectic work schedule I took him in." After a full chest X-ray and biopsy, it was confirmed. Max had a malignant mast cell tumor. The outcome: The tumor was removed and Max is doing fine. Successful treatment depends on the pet owner's ability to catch the symptoms early. "I usually tell people the best way to detect a tumor is just to pet their dog or cat a lot," says Ruthanne Chun, doctor of veterinary medicine and animal cancer specialist at Kansas State University. "If you happen to feel an abnormal bump or lump, or if the animal seems tender where it didn't used to be, then you ought to have it looked at." Because Max's owner detected the lump early and acted quickly, he was able to have the cancer removed and helped save Max's life.

First and foremost, the diagnosis of cancer must come from a veterinarian. Your doctor will gather evidence (X-rays, ultrasound, blood tests, the physical appearance of the cancer, or the physical signs caused by the cancer) to verify that cancer is the verdict. The good news is: "...a diagnosis of cancer is not the death sentence it used to be. There are many methods of treatment, and there are new discoveries almost weekly," says Bob Goldstein, V.M.D., of Westport, Conn., veteran holistic practitioner and medical editor of the "Love of Animals" newsletter, published by Earth Animal. According to Richard Pitcairn, D.V.M., Ph.D., treatments can have three outcomes: They can maintain a good quality of life during the time remaining; extend the life span beyond what is expected; or cure the condition by shrinking or obliterating the tumors. Keep in mind, "Some cancers are more deadly and difficult to treat than others. An isolated skin cancer, for instance, is much less dangerous than a systemic lymph cancer. Treatment recommendations differ depending on the type and location of the cancer," adds Dr. Goldstein.