

Early Signs of Cancer?

Cancer can be a silent killer for dogs.

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Q. My sister's nine-year-old Beagle had to be put to sleep this week. We are all so sad because it was so unexpected. He had been throwing up (not uncommon for a dog who got into everything) and a battery of tests showed he was suffering from lymphoma and it had started to spread to his organs. We are even more upset because the vet told us that this probably wouldn't have been picked up by a routine exam so we have no way of knowing how long he had been sick. Unless it's something obvious like a lump, are there any other signs that might have allowed us to catch this sooner? She has another dog and I have two, and we want to know what to look for to hopefully spare us this kind of heartbreak in the future. Thank you. A. I am very sorry to hear about the loss of your sister's dog due to lymphoma. Cancer really is the silent, stalking killer. It leaves very little trace of its existence until it's too late. Blood tests and X-rays usually appear normal, until the disease is very advanced.

Just like with human medicine, new research is needed to develop methods of early detection. Very vigilant dog owners can pick up on early signs of cancer. Remember, cancer usually affects older dogs, but not always. It's the No. 1 cause of death in dogs (in humans the No. 1 cause of death is heart disease).

With lymphoma, your dog's lymph nodes may become enlarged, and you would feel large, marble-like masses under the jaw. You might notice a loss of energy, or a decrease in appetite. All dogs throw up once in a while, but an increase for no apparent reason should be checked out by your vet.

Newer technologies, such as ultrasound and laparoscopy (a noninvasive surgery that allows a veterinary surgeon to look around in the abdomen), have helped with early diagnosis of cancer, but more work is needed. Hopefully, some day blood tests will be developed as an early screening test.

In the meantime, try not to worry about your other dogs. Cancer in general is not considered hereditary (although that is sometimes part of the picture). Enjoy your dogs, and love them until they don't know what to do.

Best, Jon Geller, DVM

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