

A Special Bond With Dog

Research on human breast cancer benefits dogs.

Joanne Healey Howl, DVM

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Dog owners love to cuddle, snuggle and hug their dogs - for many it's the most relaxing part of their day. Six years ago, however, when Susan Rubb, a system engineer at SAS Institute Inc. in Rockville, Md., petted Chelsea, her terrier mix, her blood pressure skyrocketed. "I found several little BB-sized balls under her skin near one of her breasts," Rubb said. "I knew right away it wasn't good news."

Susan and her husband, Michael, made an appointment with their veterinarian, Lisa Taylor, DVM, a small-animal practitioner at Greater Annapolis Veterinary Hospital. Within a week, Dr. Taylor had removed the lump and the surrounding breast. A laboratory report confirmed the Rubbs' worst fear: Chelsea had a mammary carcinoma, breast cancer. "I went home and cried," Rubb said.

The diagnosis of any form of cancer is frightening, but breast cancer is especially so for many women because they face the same threat. Fortunately, as awareness of the disease grows through the efforts of organizations, like the National Breast Cancer Coalition in Washington, D.C. , and advocates, like the late Linda McCartney, new research is helping many women - and pets. "We're used to seeing research done on dogs that leads to treatment of people," said Eva Sartin, DVM, MS, Ph.D., Diplomate American College of Veterinary Practitioners, a veterinary pathologist and associate professor at Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine in Alabama. "Breast cancer research is actually kind of backwards," she added. Money pours into human trials, and dogs benefit secondhand.

Breast cancer affects an estimated 0.16 percent of dogs, most frequently striking female dogs between the ages of 6 and 10. Male dogs can get breast cancer, but it is rare - only about 1 percent of all cases.

As with humans, early detection is the key to cure. When the lump is treated early, as was Chelsea's, a dog has a 75 percent chance of complete cure with surgery alone. "It's the other 5 percent of dogs - the ones that have cancer spread throughout their body - that are on the cutting edge of cancer treatment research," said Greg Ogilvie, DVM, Diplomate American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine, a professor and veterinary oncologist at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine in Fort Collins.