

Natural Dog Success Story: Corrosive Cure

Black salve attacks terrier's oral cancer.

Denise Flaim

The dog: Satellite, a 14-year-old Wire Fox Terrier.

The problem: Two years ago, Satellite developed a squamous cell carcinoma of the mouth, a common but often deadly oral cancer in dogs. He had surgery to remove the half-inch-wide growth, which was behind his teeth on the floor of his mouth. Within a month, it grew back to its original size.

The conventional approach: "The normal treatment is to amputate the jaw where the tumor is," says Nancy Scanlan, DVM, of Sherman Oaks Veterinary Group. But the tumor's aggressive growth — it was starting to spread to the other side of the mouth — meant Satellite would need to lose a third of his jaw. Scanlan worried that amputation would be a difficult, if not impossible, adjustment for the senior-citizen terrier. But doing nothing was likely a death sentence: The average survival rate without treatment is just four months.

The holistic approach: Scanlan decided to try black salve, one of several herbal formulas popularized in the 1930s and based on Native American folk medicine. So named because of its tarry appearance and smell, the salve, also called cansema, has had a renaissance in recent years as a holistic treatment for tumors, particularly skin cancers.

How it works: Black salve contains two cancer-fighting herbs, bloodroot and galangal. The addition of zinc chloride, which is caustic, "kind of burns the surface," Scanlan explains, allowing the herbs to reach the cancer cells. "Bloodroot has a formulation that seems to be fairly specific for receptors on cancer cells, so it attacks cancer tissue, but doesn't do much to healthy tissue," Scanlan explains.

Initially, says Scanlan, the salve creates a crater that eventually fills up with healthy tissue.

In addition to mouth cancers, Scanlan uses black salve on other topical cancers such as malignant melanoma, fibrosarcoma, mast cell tumors, and cutaneous — but not internal — hemangiosarcoma.

The outcome: "I immediately started seeing results," remembers owner David Geffner. "The tumor turned gray and white. It looked like it was dying. Gradually it shrunk, and I'd say within a few months it was gone."

Satellite wasn't as thrilled. "He hated it," Scanlan remembers. "You had to put a fast swipe in his mouth." The salve not only tastes terrible, but ingesting too much can cause vomiting or worse.

Five months later, the tumor started to reappear. Scanlan resumed treatment, and it again receded. Today, two years later, Satellite is still cancer free.

Caveats: Although black salve is available without a prescription, and in pharmacies a milder version is sold as ichthammol ointment, Scanlan strongly urges dog owners not to use it without a vet's supervision.

"It can be painful, because it is caustic, and the animal feels the tissue dying," Scanlan says. Infection is also a potential risk. As a result, she says, "I don't hesitate to use painkillers or antibiotics."

Satellite's tumor responded very well to the black salve, but "it won't necessarily work on every single tumor. Some cancers are resistant," Scanlan cautions. The longer an owner waits to try the treatment, the larger the tumor, and the more surgeries the dog has undergone, the less likely the black salve will be successful. It also works best on soft tissue, she adds. "If the cancer's already gone into the bone, it probably will not work."

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