

## Introduction

A cancer diagnosis in your pet is a frightening experience that can be associated with stress, concern, and anxiety. Our team at The Oncology Service, LLC hopes to help guide both you and your primary care veterinarian through the initial and follow-up management of your pet with options and decisions on deciding if referral is the best next step.

## Top Five Misconceptions about Veterinary Oncology

Although we use the same drugs that are used in human oncology, the similarities in the chemotherapy experience stop there. Here are some common misconceptions about veterinary oncology that may help with your decision to pursue a specialist's opinion or to consider pursuing treatment.

### **Misconception #1: Cancer is not treatable in animals.**

Truth: Many pets diagnosed with cancer have the potential of receiving treatments aimed at addressing the cancer condition and/or improving and maintaining their quality of life. The extent and duration of a treatment benefit is dependent on many factors including the type of the cancer, the stage of the cancer (i.e. the extent of disease), the available therapies used to treat the cancer, and the individual features of the patient. Many animals with cancer now can be cured or managed long-term, and this goal should not be overlooked.

### **Misconception #2: My pet will lose all of his/her hair.**

Truth: While there are certain dog breeds and some cats that do show hair loss during chemotherapy, for the most part, this is not common. Hair loss is more common in non-shedding dog breeds (i.e. poodles). If hair loss occurs regrowth will occur when chemotherapy is stopped.

### **Misconception #3: My pet will be miserable during chemotherapy.**

Truth: The image of the human cancer patient experiencing chemotherapy related side effects is not our expectation in cats and dogs. In general, chemotherapy in dogs and cats is well tolerated. This is in part related to our goal to use protocols that maximize quality of life and the resilience of our pet animals. Most pets will experience some mild and self-limiting side effects including decreased appetite, energy, and overall demeanor for 24-48 hours after a treatment. Isolated episodes of vomiting and diarrhea can also be encountered. The risk for more significant side effects includes a 1:10 chance of vomiting and diarrhea characterized by > 3 episodes of vomiting in a 24 hour period or diarrhea that may be profuse or occasionally bloody in nature. A 1:100 chance of life threatening complications primarily associated with white blood cell suppression (neutropenia) and secondary infection can also occur with most chemotherapy. Dogs and cats that at risk for these more severe chemotherapy side effects are typically very lethargic, not eating, dehydrated, weak, and many will have a fever. There are some less commonly used treatment protocols where this risk is higher. If you are concerned about your pet's current clinical status, please contact us or have your pet evaluated. In addition to these more typical side effects, individual drugs may also have other side effects that are specific to that therapeutic. See our chemotherapy handout for further information on side effects.

## **Misconception #4: It takes thousands of dollars to treat my pet for cancer.**

Truth: An important responsibility of our team is to develop a list of treatment options that can be financially acceptable to a family. Some forms of cancer therapy for pet animals are expensive. Having said this, there are often alternatives to these conventional options. For instance, clinical trials and compassionate use programs, available through our practice, involve novel anti-cancer therapies that may be provided at no cost. In some instances, these programs may also provide support towards the costs of some if not all care related to a patient. Our unique relationships with Animal Clinical Investigation, LLC ([www.animalci.com](http://www.animalci.com)) and academic veterinary oncology groups facilitate access to many of these trial opportunities.

## **Misconception # 5: My dog is old, is it worth it?**

Truth: Cancer typically affects geriatric/senior companion animals; therefore, most of the information that we have regarding the efficacy and tolerability of the chemotherapy/radiation therapy protocols already takes into account the use of these treatments in older populations of animals. Concurrent illnesses (i.e. kidney, heart, liver disease) have to be assessed and considered by our team as we develop and discuss the treatment options for your pet.

## **Basic Cancer Vocabulary**

There are some basic terms that you should be familiar with to better understand your discussion with your primary care veterinarian, your oncologist, and also any research that you may elect to do. These terms are some of the most commonly used when discussing cancer and are attributable to most, if not all, tumor types.

Reference: NIH National Cancer Institute ([www.icc.nci.nih.gov/dictionary](http://www.icc.nci.nih.gov/dictionary)).

### **Cancer (Synonyms: Malignancy, Neoplasia)**

Abnormal cells that have gained survival advantages that allow them to divide without control and to invade other parts of the body (metastasis). Cancers can either be a solid tumor (ie carcinomas/sarcomas) or they can be hematologic (or blood borne), like those seen with lymphoma or leukemia. The most common types of cancers include: carcinomas, sarcomas, round cell tumors, or leukemias.

### **Diagnosing Cancer**

Here are the most common ways that we diagnosis cancer and determine the extent of the disease to decide on the best treatment.

Information from the tumor: Using either histology (assessing a section of tumor tissue often called a biopsy) or cytology (assessing a sample of tumor cells from a fine needle aspirate), we can obtain an idea of the cell of origin. Histology is the only method where we can determine the tumor grade (predictor of local behavior and metastatic potential) and the completeness of surgical excision (surgical margin evaluation).

Tumor Stage: The stage of a cancer is an evaluation of the extent of the disease in the body. This is based on the T- tumor, N- node (lymph node), M- metastasis system, and is a reflection of the information obtained from additional testing including bloodwork, urinalysis, chest/abdominal imaging, regional lymph node evaluation, etc.

## Types of Cancer Treatment Available

Surgery: Surgery is a local therapy often used either to remove the entire mass to eliminate disease or to debulk the tumor to microscopic disease in hopes for heightened success with follow-up (or adjuvant) treatment.

Chemotherapy: Systemic treatment given with the intent to kill rapidly dividing cancer cells in the primary tumor and throughout the body.

Targeted therapy: Systemic treatment that is directed at certain aspects of the tumor cells (ie. receptor tyrosine kinase inhibitors), and, because it is more directed, may be associated with fewer side effects than chemotherapy. Addresses the primary tumor and throughout the body.

Radiation Therapy: A form of local therapy that uses high-energy radiation to kill cancer cells and shrink primary tumors.

Palliative/Supportive Care: Therapy that addresses the symptoms and side effects of the disease in order to improve quality of life but does not address the cancer.

## When To Seek An Oncology Consultation

### Who is a veterinary oncologist? How do I find one?

A veterinary oncologist is a veterinarian who has undergone additional, more specialized training after veterinary school in the area of oncology. Upon successful completion of two-three years of training in the field and several examinations (or boards), these veterinarians are then considered board-certified and are designated by the title of DACVIM-Medical Oncology [link to Khanna and Manley or DACVR- Radiation Oncology [link to Ira Gordon]. There are also a subset of highly trained veterinarians whose practice focuses on oncology [link to Tony Rusk]. Your primary care veterinarian will have a list of local oncologists in the area and will be able to put you in contact with them. Another good resource is located at the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine website ([www.acvim.org](http://www.acvim.org)) under the left hand tab "Search for a specialist". There you can search under your state and zip code for area veterinary oncologists.

### What can I gain by seeing a veterinary oncologist versus from my primary care veterinarian?

During an oncology consultation, your pet will have a thorough history obtained about their disease (ie onset of clinical signs/tumor, growth rate, previous therapy and response, etc) and concurrent medical conditions, a physical examination, a review of any staging tests performed (ie bloodwork, urinalysis, radiographs, biopsy/cytology results, etc), and a discussion about additional diagnostics needed. After all the information is obtained, the oncologist will then integrate all pertinent findings and provide information about the diagnosis, the treatment options available including the goals, the side effects, and the costs associated with that therapy, and will then help tailor a customized treatment plan to fit your pet's and your family's goals and needs. Treatment for your pet will then be followed up either with your oncologist (if pursuing chemotherapy/targeted therapy/radiation therapy) or coordinated with your primary care veterinarian.

We hope that the above information helps lessen the stress and confusion associated with your pet's recent cancer diagnosis. We are here to help serve you and your pet's needs and look forward to helping you and your family.

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