

CANCER IN PETS IS NOT UNCOMMON

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(Emphasis added)

Cancer is an often life-threatening disease that many people think affects only humans. So it comes as a shock to many pet owners when their pet is diagnosed with cancer.

Dr. Ruthanne Chun, assistant professor of clinical sciences at Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, says cancer in animals is not uncommon and it is very similar to cancer in humans.

"It can either be genetic, environmental or just a random mutation, so it's very similar to cancer in people," Chun said. "The common types of cancer that we see may be more common because we can detect them more easily.

"They involve the lymph nodes, limbs or skin tumors, so they are visible and easy to see," she said. "There are some tumors in dogs like lung tumors that we might not pick up at all until they're very large and causing the dog to have clinical problems, so it really depends on the type of cancer."

Chun says there are a number of indicators that an animal may have cancer. The best way to detect cancer, she advises, is for owners to feel their animals over carefully once a week.

"Just pet them thoroughly once a week and feel for abnormal lumps, bumps, swellings and any area that's painful," Chun said. "Sometimes animals will have open wounds that are ulcerated that don't heal for a long time, and that would be another potential sign that it's cancer."

There are also very non-specific things like not eating well, weight loss, vomiting or diarrhea, she said. Also, certain breeds are more prone to getting cancer than others.

"Breeds such as boxers, Bernese mountain dogs and golden retrievers are overrepresented in the development of cancer," Chun said. "There have even been studies that have traced the family tree of dogs, and these have suggested a genetic predisposition."

Often the diagnosis of cancer leaves owners feeling that there is no hope for their pet. However, Chun says that many times the cancer can be treated, and the pet can continue to lead a fulfilling life.

"When we treat animals with cancer, we carefully measure how good is the animal's quality of life versus how aggressive should we be with our therapy," Chun said. "We use the same types of drugs that they use in human medicine, but because we really want to maintain a good to excellent quality of life in our patients we tend to use lower doses at less frequent intervals."

Veterinarians have designed their chemotherapy protocols for animals so that pets don't become terribly ill, Chun said. Less than 5 percent of the animals develop severe vomiting, diarrhea or a drop in their blood counts and need to be hospitalized.

"Most of my patients and the owners don't even realize that the animal has had chemotherapy," she said. "Owners always worry about the animal's hair falling out. "Bald dogs do look pretty different, but it's actually not very common for their hair to fall out," Chun said. "Animals that always have to go to the groomers, those are the ones we worry about losing their hair. But once chemotherapy is over, the animal's hair grows back in."

Cost is a significant factor in deciding to go through with the cancer treatments. For many people, their pets are more than just animals, so the owners want to do everything that they can to prolong their lives and keep them feeling good.

"I know a lot of people say, 'Well \$2,000, I don't have that kind of money, I can't afford it,' and I understand and wish we could make things cheaper, but for other people they feel very strongly that it is worth it and they can set aside the funds," Chun said. "If we look at it solely from the animal's point of view, and are able to buy them another eight to 12 months to maybe even a year and a half, that's a very long time from that animal's point of view. So usually from their perspective I think it's worth it."