

Common Cancers in Dogs and Cats

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Cancer is common. One in three people, dogs and cats will develop a cancer over their lifetime. Some are curable, some are able to be held in remission for periods of time, and some are manageable. Knowing the most common ones that can affect your pet will help with early detection, prompt referral to an oncologist and the best possible outcome.

Lymphoma comes in many forms (there are over 30 different types). It occurs in every few hundred dogs and cats OF ANY AGE. Dogs typically develop enlarged lymph nodes – the most obvious of these are at the back of the jaw. Cats can have this form, but it is equally common in the stomach and intestine, causing vomiting. The disease commonly kills within a few months without treatment, but most dogs and cats that receive help for lymphoma enter remission and have completely normal quality of life. How long remission lasts for depends on the type of lymphoma, the type of treatment, and luck. Surgery is usually not helpful.

Squamous cell carcinoma comes in 2 main forms and is usually in middle aged pets. The first is due to too much sunlight on pale skin. Typically on cat's noses and dog's bellies, it'll look like a scratch at first, but won't heal. Treated early (surgery, freezing or injections), this form is curable. The second type is most often a head and neck cancer. This form is aggressive and requires aggressive treatment. The best results come from surgery, radiation and medical treatment often as a combination. Look for a red wound (that doesn't heal quickly) or mound anywhere in the mouth.

Mast cell tumours are the most common skin cancers in dogs, and also occur in cats, at any age. They can look and feel like just about anything – most often they'll be a hairless raised circle, or a softer lump under the skin. They can be itchy and open into wounds in some cases. These are often curable and can be diagnosed with a very simple fine needle aspirate (hypodermic needle sucking out cancer cells and placed on a slide). For most, sedation is not necessary to perform this test. Now you've read about the most common cancers in pets, it'd be great if you set aside 5 minutes, once every month or 2 to give each of your pets a quick check over. Look in the mouth, feel for any lumps under the skin, and even check their bum. If something doesn't look right, take them to your vet and if a cancer is suspected, consider asking for referral to a specialist oncologist. Often, the earlier the diagnosis is made, the greater range of options you'll have to help.