

Symptoms of Cancer

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At the risk of losing your interest straight up, cancer can cause any symptom. Anything. Anywhere in the body. More on that below. First, let's bust a few myths about cancer symptoms.

1. "If he had cancer, he'd be sick wouldn't he?" Most cancers don't make your pet 'sick' at first. The most common reason I see a pet with a poor appetite due to cancer as the first symptom is because the gut is involved (for example stomach cancer) or because a cancer of the mouth makes it hurt to eat. Even lymphoma, a cancer that is almost always body wide, most often causes obvious lumps all over the body long before it makes them unwell.

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2. "I'd know if my pet was in pain. " No, you wouldn't. At least not always. Pain on the outside might make a pet cry or react when you touch the sore bit. Pain in a leg will cause a limp, though it may be subtle if close to the hip or shoulder. Pain on the inside? Cats have evolved to find no benefit in sharing their pain with others. Dogs have evolved to find benefit in HIDING their pain from others in the pack (you). If pain is obvious it's because it's severe enough they can't hide it. I have lost count of the number of old dogs I see with cancer, that once put on a pain killer are better than they were years before the cancer. Why? Probably arthritis causing pain when everyone assumed they were just 'slowing down with age'. So how do vets manage this pain problem? Simple; if some people would be in pain with the same problem, it's worth a trial of pain killers.

3. "If cancer is there, it has to cause some symptoms." No it doesn't. In fact every cancer goes through often a lengthy period of months or years without any symptoms at all. The best way to show this is in people. 98 out of 100 people over 70 years old have thyroid cancer – don't worry because in 90 of those 98 it never grows and never causes a problem and never causes symptoms. The point is, cancer by itself is just a bunch of cells. For it to cause symptoms it has DO something. Which leads nicely back to where I started!

Cancer can cause symptoms because:

a) There is a lot of it. It forms lumps or tumours and these squash something else stopping it working. For example, some dogs with anal sac carcinoma, a tumour that grows right next to their bum, will show constipation as their first symptom because the tumour leaves no room for anything to pass.

b) It is leaking a hormone into the blood. Example? Lymphoma in some dogs produce a hormone called PTH-rp. Normally, we all make tiny amounts of this before we are born. If the cancer switches on production again, the hormone strips calcium from the bones, which makes the blood calcium go high, which stops muscles working, making the dogs lethargic and not want to eat (because the gut muscles become weak too).

c) They leak fluid. Sometimes watery fluid. Sometimes blood. Most often INSIDE the body which then means the first symptoms are shallow breathing (if the fluid is in the lung – note NOT coughing) or a swollen belly. External bleeding from the nose, mouth or bum is easier to notice and of course can be due to things other than cancer.

d) They can invade into nearby body parts. Example? Bone cancer invades through the normal bone nearby, causing pain – usually lameness.

e) If it grows on the outside it may be an obvious lump. Don't expect your vet to have magic fingers. Few tumours can be reliably diagnosed by looking at them or feeling them. In fact, I see more cancers that are MIS-DIAGNOSED because a biopsy wasn't done (the lump was assumed to

be harmless) than I see tumours CORRECTLY diagnosed without 'needing' a biopsy. So, how to pick up cancer in your pet? Lumps obviously should be checked, and tested (or repeat measures are made and tested if growing). Any dog or cat that seems old before their time needs a check-up. ANY symptom that isn't going away or responding to symptomatic treatment needs review, and referral . If your vet doesn't think cancer is likely, then ask for referral to a specialist in Internal Medicine (basically the best people to diagnose difficult cases). If it IS cancer, they can pass you on to an Oncologist.

It is true that early diagnosis doesn't help EVERY cancer patient. Late diagnosis hurts many.