

Coping with CANCER

The best strategy for cancer is
early diagnosis and treatment



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Photography by James Robinson

Q Our beloved old Cocker Spaniel, Gemma, is a cancer survivor. Two years ago she was diagnosed with cancer in her gums, and with determination, courage and strength, she underwent an eight-week course of radiation treatment, which was thankfully very successful.

Since the treatment, she suffers recurring infections in her mouth and her gums are very sensitive. She is treated symptomatically with antibiotics. We understand that this is a direct result of the radiation as her immune system has been compromised.

Is this common in this type of cancer and is it normal that after two years there hasn't been any improvement? Does this mean that her immune system will never recover?

What should we be looking out for with her and her mouth, as our biggest fear is the return of the cancer?

Eileen Fraser – Fairlands, Gauteng

A Well done for going through the treatment process with Gemma. Client compliance with the recommended treatment protocol and follow-ups are critical for full recovery, and therapy monitoring in some cancer types, but also importantly, to detect early recurrence.

The “recurring infections” sound more like dental disease, which is very common in a Spaniel and might well not be due to the immune disease.

The best person to ascertain whether there is tumour regrowth, or if Gemma is suffering from the after-effects of radiation therapy, is the veterinarian who provided her treatment.

Constant check-ups and photographic recording are part of the treatment protocol, and your attending veterinarian and Gemma would benefit and appreciate a check-up.

The very word cancer frightens us all because it sounds like the end, and yet there are so many stories that tell us it's just part of life's journey, or even a new beginning.

Cancer Basics

The fact is that 50 per cent of dogs over the age of 10 years develop some form of cancer. The good news is that more than half of those canine cancer cases, if caught early, are curable.

People's reactions to a pet with cancer usually fall into one of two categories. The first is denial and numbness, with total passive submission to the process, and the second is complete involvement and awareness of the journey and the process. A good balance between the two is probably the answer. There is so much knowledge and information available regarding cancer types and treatments that you have to be careful not to let your own emotions as an owner interfere with the treatment and advice given. Always act in the best interests of the patient.

Either way, veterinarians are trained to follow a logical diagnostic process to "stage" the cancer. Some lumps and bumps are so familiar that knowing immediately what type it is and how it behaves or is treated, is simple. Other lumps and bumps are more invasive and spread to surgically inaccessible places. They would require other forms of treatment such as radiation, chemo or immunotherapy.

The chance of cancer increases with age and is more prevalent in certain breeds. Simply spaying a bitch before her first season decreases the chance of breast cancer

over eight times. Good oral care decreases the chance of oral cancer.

The best strategy for cancer is early diagnosis and treatment, which will lead to a 60 percent cure rate. Cancer patients left too late will have months, not years, to live. Gone are the days of "let's wait and see if it gets bigger!" Veterinary oncology has developed in leaps and bounds in the last 20 years, alongside cancer treatment in humans. Costs aside, there is no reason why your pet cannot receive the best care available.

ALWAYS ACT IN THE BEST INTEREST OF THE PATIENT

Cost, time, commitment and the likelihood of a positive outcome all influence your decision as a pet owner. Breathe and stay calm, and understand that the diagnostic process, extensive testing and investigative testing are necessary in some forms of cancer. This is to enable you to make an informed decision with your veterinarian on what the best option is for a pain-free, comfortable life for your dog.

So take heart in the fact that there are many very successful cancer treatment options and that even if your pet has a more serious type of cancer, you can rest assured that veterinarians and staff can keep a pet pain-free and comfortable for as long as is humanely possible. 🐕



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