



The Pet Oncologist

## FAQs: Cancer in Pets



**A cancer diagnosis in a loved pet can be challenging on many levels. The Pet Oncologist has compiled a list of ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ about cancer in pets, to help owners understand a bit more about cancer.**

### ***My vet thinks my pet has cancer. Now what?***

An accurate diagnosis is essential in making informed treatment decisions for your pet. Start by discussing with your vet about having fine-needle-aspirate samples (for cytology) or biopsy (tissue samples) of your pet's cancer to confirm the type of cancer. If your pet's cancer is not straight forward, you can ask your vet to contact The Pet Oncologist for advice, or about referral to a nearby Vet Oncologist (Animal Cancer Specialist).

### ***What is cancer?***

Cancer is where normal cells in the body become abnormal, by growing in an uncontrolled and excessive manner. It is sometimes referred to as ‘neoplasia’ or ‘tumour’. Cancers are often named after the type of cell that is growing out of control.

Cancer can occur anywhere in the body, and it is important to understand that it is not just one disease. There are over 100 different types of cancer that can affect pets, and each will behave differently.

Cancer can cause a problem locally where it grows, and depending on the type of cancer, it can spread to other parts in the body via the blood and/or lymphatic system. When the cancer has spread to other areas in the body, it is called ‘metastasis’.

### ***How common is cancer in pets?***

Cancer is the number one cause of death in pets over the age of ten, and one in four deaths is due to cancer regardless of age.

### ***Why is cancer so common in pets?***

The fact that your pet has developed cancer is not unusual. Cancer is more common as pets live longer, because of improved nutrition, vaccination, and routine and advanced health care. As your pet ages, their immune system weakens and cancer becomes a higher risk, just like in humans.

### ***What are common signs of cancer in pets?***

Pets may present with:

- An abnormal swelling or mass that persists or continues to grow
- Wounds that do not heal or are not going away
- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Non-specific signs of illness such as lower energy levels, loss of appetite, diarrhoea and vomiting
- Unexplained weight loss
- Pale gums
- A bad odour, especially from the mouth
- Bleeding or discharge from any opening of the body (e.g. mouth, nose or bottom)
- Persistent limping in the leg
- Difficulties eating, drinking, swallowing, breathing, urinating or defecating

Cancer in pets can present in many different ways, and it can sometimes be subtle. Often cancer is best treated when it is detected early. Pet owners know their pets better than anyone else. If your pet is not right in any way, inform your vet of these changes. Lastly, just because your pet has signs of cancer or is acting differently, does not mean your pet has cancer.

### ***What causes cancer in pets?***

There are many possible causes of cancer such as viruses, family history and genetics (e.g. certain breeds), exposure to environmental carcinogens (e.g. second-hand tobacco, pesticides and herbicides), age, weakened immune system, diet, and urban or industrial living. The cause of cancer is likely due to multiple factors, and often, the actual cause of cancer in pets is unknown.

### ***How do I find a reputable Vet Oncologist in my area? How do I know if they are qualified?***

Vets certified by Veterinary Colleagues (e.g. ACVIM, ANZCVS and ECVIM) in oncology have undergone specialty training in Veterinary Oncology. They have spent at least three years in training, passed challenging examinations, and contributed to knowledge in the veterinary oncology community through scientific research and publication. These are the best vets to manage challenging cancer cases. Please contact me if you need help finding a Vet Oncologist in your area.

### ***What if I cannot find a Vet Oncologist in my area?***

In circumstances where it is a considerable distance to travel to seek out specialty care, your vet can contact The Pet Oncologist, and together, we can formulate a plan with available treatment options for your pet.

### ***Can I call you or speak to a Vet Oncologist via email or phone about my pet?***

All specialty hospitals handle this differently. In most circumstances, you will need to make an appointment and bring your pet in to speak to a Vet Oncologist. Unfortunately, due to legal reasons, I cannot provide online or telephone advice to pet owners. However, I can discuss your pet's care with your vet and provide a detailed consultation report within 12-24 hours of receiving an online submission form from your vet. For further information, visit <https://www.thepetoncologist.com/consultations>.

### ***What resources exist that might help me further understand my pet's cancer?***

The best resource for understanding your pet's cancer is through a Vet Oncologist. He or she has access to the latest and most up to date information about the diagnosis, treatment and management of cancer in pets. He or she also belongs to a large professional network of colleagues who he or she regularly attends scientific meetings and discussions on pets with cancer.

There are many websites and books available that share information and experiences relating to pets with cancer. Resources authored by a Vet Oncologist usually contain the most reliable information. I have compiled handouts on 'Frequently Asked Questions' on common cancers in pets, and a 'Useful Links' page that pet owners may find helpful, visit <https://www.thepetoncologist.com/frequently-asked-questions> and <https://www.thepetoncologist.com/useful-links>, respectively.

### ***Do most pets with cancer end up having surgery?***

Although more cancer is cured with surgery, it is crucial to understand that surgery is not always the best treatment for every cancer in every individual. Some cancers may respond better with one or a combination of surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and/or immunotherapy. Some cancers send out long "fingers" or "tentacles" that are microscopic (i.e. not visible to the naked eye). If these extensions are not removed, the cancer will most likely grow back. Any mass that is removed should always be submitted for histopathology and analysed by a veterinary pathologist, to determine the diagnosis and whether the cancer is malignant (i.e. aggressive) or benign. Sometimes a biopsy (tissue sample) before complete removal can make a huge difference in whether or not a larger surgery is necessary. Also, sometimes a simple fine-needle aspirate sample for cytology can make a diagnosis. However, histopathology is the gold standard in obtaining a diagnosis and helps answer questions like: Will this cancer grow back? Will this cancer spread? Is there a cure? What additional treatment is necessary to control regrowth or spread of the cancer? What can I do to help make my pet feel better for as long as possible? What if I do nothing?

### ***How can I help my pet through cancer-related treatment?***

Be an advocate for your pet and always feel comfortable asking questions about your pet's cancer. Obtain reliable information about your pet's cancer in terms of the biologic behaviour, prognosis and available treatment options from a Vet Oncologist. Define what 'good quality of life' is for your pet early in the process. This will make it easier to assess if your pet starts to lose interest in things that he or she once enjoyed doing. Inform your vet about any supplements that you are giving your pet that they might not know about. Your vet must know about all the medications and supplements your pet is taking, to determine whether there could be potentially harmful interactions with cancer-related treatments.

**Have a question about cancer that is not listed here? Suggest a question and The Pet Oncologist can add it to this document. Email: [info@thepetoncologist.com](mailto:info@thepetoncologist.com).**