Canine Lymphoma

What is it?

Lymphoma is a common type of cancer in dogs. It results from the unregulated growth of malignant lymphocytes that often affects lymph nodes, bone marrow, liver, and spleen, but can also be seen in the eyes, skin, and gastrointestinal tract. There are several classification systems for lymphoma based on where it is located in the body, how aggressive it is (high or low grade), and what type of cells are involved (T-lymphocytes vs. B-lymphocytes). Dogs can present with enlarged lymph nodes and no other signs of illness. Some dogs may be depressed, lethargic, vomiting, losing weight, losing fur/hair, febrile, and/or have decreased appetite. Lymphoma may be diagnosed with blood tests, an aspirate or biopsy of a lymph node, or with an x-ray or ultrasound exam, depending on its location.

How is it treated?

Chemotherapy is the treatment of choice for most pets with lymphoma. There are many chemotherapeutic drugs and drug combinations that can be used to treat this disease. Giving prednisone, a steroid, alone can improve the quality, and sometimes quantity, of life. While there is no cure for lymphoma, chemotherapy often results in remission (no outward signs of cancer). The first remission can last 6 months or longer, depending on the chemotherapy protocol used. A second remission is generally a little more difficult to achieve and lasts a shorter time.

What is the prognosis for lymphoma?

Complete cure for lymphoma is rare average survival time with effective treatment is approximately 1 year. Prognosis is better if an animal presents with only enlarged lymph nodes (no other symptoms), and is better with B-cell lymphoma than with T-cell lymphoma. A dog appropriately treated for lymphoma can live a relatively comfortable, productive life for many months. The following symptoms of disease may occur quickly in your dog with or without treatment. A personalized treatment plan is important to slow the progression of lymphoma. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the best treatment protocol for your dog.

What symptoms may be present as the disease progresses?

Early stages symptoms may include:

- Enlarged lymph nodes (may be seen in one or all regions- under the jaw, in the chest region, armpits, behind the knees, in the groin)
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea or black, tarry stool
- Fever
- Lethargy, depression
- Reclusive behavior
- Loss of fur or hair
- Increased water consumption
- Increased urination

Late stages- persistent/worsening early stages symptoms and/or:

- Labored breathing, coughing
- Seizures, paralysis
- Difficulty swallowing
- Congestive heart failure
- Weakness, unable to rise
- Bruised, ulcerated skin

Crisis – Immediate veterinary assistance needed regardless of the disease:

- Difficulty breathing
- Prolonged seizures
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Sudden collapse
- Profuse bleeding – internal or external
- Unresponsive, comatose
- Crying/whining from pain*

*It should be noted that most animals have high threshold for pain. Any vocalization that is unusual for your pet may indicate her or his pain and anxiety have reached a severe level. Consult with a veterinarian immediately! If possible, one that knows your pet.*