

Skin Cancer in Dogs

Skin Cancer in Dogs: Understanding Risks, Symptoms, and Treatments

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in dogs, especially in those with light skin, short coats, or thin fur. While not all types of skin cancer are caused by sun exposure, it is a leading risk factor. Here's a comprehensive overview of skin cancer in dogs, including causes, symptoms, prevention, and treatment options.



What Causes Skin Cancer in Dogs?

Dogs that have light skin, a thin coat, or a lack of fur are particularly vulnerable to sun-related skin cancer. Key factors include:

- **Sun Exposure:** Prolonged exposure to sunlight can lead to skin damage and increase the risk of cancer, particularly in areas that are less pigmented.
- **Genetics:** Certain breeds may have a genetic predisposition to skin cancer.
- **Skin Damage:** Compulsive licking of specific areas can cause skin damage and potentially lead to cancer.



Recognising Sunburn in Dogs

Sunburn in dogs can manifest as:

- **Red Skin:** Noticeable redness in areas exposed to the sun.
- **Hair Loss:** Shedding of fur, particularly in vulnerable areas.
- **Commonly Affected Areas:** The bridge of the nose, belly, inner legs, ear tips, and areas with low pigmentation.



How to Protect Your Dog from Sunburn and Skin Cancer

To minimise the risk of sunburn and skin-related cancers:

- **Limit Sun Exposure:** Keep your dog indoors during peak UV hours (usually 10 AM to 3 PM) or ensure they stay in shaded areas.

- **Use Sunscreen:** Apply a dog-safe sunscreen formulated for canines. If unavailable, a fragrance-free sunscreen for human babies may be used, ensuring it's non-toxic if licked off. Look for an SPF of at least 15 to 30 and avoid ingredients like zinc, which can be harmful to dogs.



Signs of Skin Cancer in Dogs

Skin cancer can present in various forms, including:

- **Lumps and Bumps:** Unusual growths that may be black, brown, grey, pink, or red.
- **Lesions and Scabs:** Any persistent scabs or lesions that do not heal should be examined by a veterinarian.
- **Warty Growths:** These may be benign but require monitoring.

Types of Skin Cancer in Dogs

1. **Malignant Melanoma:**
 - Arises from pigment-producing cells (melanocytes) and is typically found in mucous membranes (mouth, nose).
 - Can grow rapidly and metastasise to lymph nodes and organs.
2. **Squamous Cell Carcinoma:**
 - Often linked to sun exposure, it can appear as minor abrasions but requires prompt treatment to prevent surrounding tissue destruction.
3. **Mast Cell Tumours:**

- The most common skin cancer in dogs, originating in mast cells of the immune system. Causes include genetic factors, inflammation, and irritation.



Diagnosing Skin Cancer

Veterinarians will often perform:

- **Fine Needle Aspiration:** To obtain a sample of the lump for microscopic examination.
- **Biopsy:** If the aspiration does not provide conclusive results, a surgical biopsy may be necessary to establish a diagnosis.

Treatment Options for Skin Cancer

Fortunately, many skin cancers are treatable, with common approaches including:

- **Surgery:** Removing the tumour is often effective.
- **Radiation Therapy:** May be recommended for certain types of cancer.
- **Chemotherapy:** Occasionally used depending on the cancer type and stage.



Prognosis for Dogs with Skin Cancer

The prognosis for dogs with skin cancer is generally positive. Many dogs recover fully and can lead normal lives post-treatment. Recovery prospects depend on the type and aggressiveness of the cancer, as well as how advanced it is at the time of diagnosis.

Conclusion

Awareness of skin cancer symptoms and proactive prevention measures can significantly enhance your dog's quality of life and longevity. Regular check-ups and consultations with a veterinarian for any unusual growths or behaviours are essential to ensure your furry friend stays healthy and happy.