

Cancer in Cats

Coping with Cancer in Cats: What You Should Know

Just like us, cats can develop cancer, particularly as they age, though even younger cats aren't immune. The most common types of cancer in our feline friends involve the white blood cells, skin, and breast tissue.

Understanding Tumours: Is It Cancer?

When a vet mentions a tumour, it can be confusing. Tumours, or growths, can be either cancerous (malignant) or non-cancerous (benign). Essentially, a tumour is an uncontrolled growth of cells that can disrupt normal bodily functions. Benign tumours usually remain localised and don't spread, while malignant tumours can invade other tissues and organs.



What Causes Cancer in Cats?

While the exact causes of cancer can be elusive, certain factors can increase the likelihood of your cat developing this condition. For instance, white cats are particularly susceptible to skin cancer due to sun exposure. Additionally, infections from viruses like feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) or feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) can elevate cancer risks. Spaying female cats at a young age significantly reduces their chances of developing breast cancer.

Symptoms to Watch For

Cancer can manifest in various ways, depending on its location in the body. Many symptoms overlap with other health issues, making a definitive diagnosis challenging based solely on signs. If you notice any of the following, it's crucial to consult your vet:

- **Lumps:** Any new or unusual lumps should be examined.
- **Non-Healing Sores:** Persistent sores can be a warning sign.

- **Loss of Appetite or Weight:** A sudden drop in appetite or noticeable weight loss may indicate illness.
- **Lethargy or Weakness:** If your cat seems unusually tired or weak, it's worth investigating.
- **Breathing Difficulty:** Laboured breathing is always a cause for concern.
- **Limping or Digestive Problems:** Any recurring issues in these areas warrant a vet visit.

Keep in mind that cancer can be slow-growing, but it can also lead to sudden health issues.

What Happens Next?



Your vet will likely need to perform several tests to determine if cancer is present. These tests might include blood work, X-rays, ultrasounds, or MRIs. They might also test for viral infections like FIV and FeLV. One of the most definitive ways to diagnose cancer is through a biopsy, where a small sample of tissue is examined under a microscope.

Treatment Options

Treatment for cancer in cats varies widely based on the type of tumour and its progression. Here are some common treatment options:

- **Surgery:** For localised tumours, surgery can sometimes be a curative option. However, removal isn't always feasible, especially for tumours in delicate areas like the brain.
- **Chemotherapy:** This treatment is often used for various cancers. The side effects tend to be milder in cats compared to humans, but the goal is usually to slow the cancer's progression rather than to cure it. Regular vet visits for chemotherapy can be essential, and medications may cause temporary side effects like decreased appetite or gastrointestinal issues.

- **Radiotherapy:** Available only at specialised centres, this treatment also typically does not cure cancer but can help manage it.

Is It Fair to Treat an Animal with Cancer?

Vets prioritise pain management and quality of life for animals with cancer. While some cats with incurable cancer can maintain a good quality of life with proper care, there will inevitably come a point when they may begin to suffer. You and your vet should collaborate to recognize when it's time to consider euthanasia, but many agree that a happy, healthy cat doesn't need to be put down just because they have a serious illness.

How Long Can My Cat Live?

Predicting how long a cat will live after a cancer diagnosis is difficult. Factors like the type of cancer and its stage can provide some insights, but the course of the disease is not always linear. Sudden health changes can occur, so regular vet check-ups are crucial.

Common Types of Tumours in Cats

Here's a brief overview of some common cancers found in cats:

- **Skin Tumours:** Many skin lumps are benign and can be removed surgically. However, some types may recur or spread, making early intervention critical.
- **Breast Tumours:** These tumours can affect any of the cat's mammary glands. Unfortunately, about 80% are malignant. Surgical removal of the affected breast tissue is usually recommended.
- **Leukaemia and Lymphoma:** These cancers affect white blood cells and can cause various symptoms. If untreated, the average survival time is about two months, but chemotherapy may extend life.



Warning Signs of Pain

Cats are adept at hiding pain, but there are still warning signals to look out for:

- Changes in behaviour or habits
- Loss of appetite
- Reluctance to move
- Restlessness or difficulty finding a comfortable position
- Withdrawal or increased tension

Even if a cat is purring, it doesn't mean they're pain-free. If you see an improvement after administering vet-prescribed painkillers, it's a good sign that they may have been in discomfort.

Final Thoughts

Coping with a cancer diagnosis in your cat can be overwhelming, but you are not alone. Regular vet visits, open communication about your cat's condition, and being aware of symptoms can make a significant difference in managing their health and ensuring they remain comfortable. Don't hesitate to reach out to your vet with any questions or concerns about your cat's care during this challenging time.