

## LYMPHOMA– FROM REFERRAL TO RECOVERY

Lymphoma (or lymphosarcoma) is one of the most common cancers of most species. The exact origin of lymphoma in dogs is unknown. We do know that lymphoma can affect dogs and cats of any age and is equally distributed between the sexes. A genetic predisposition to lymphoma is seen in some breeds - most commonly the Golden Retriever, Flat Coat Retriever, Boxer, and Scottish terrier. Lymphoma is a cancerous disease of lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell that originates in the lymph nodes and bone marrow. The cancerous lymphoma cells can spread to other lymph nodes and to major organs.

One of the most common signs of lymphoma is the enlargement of lymph nodes that an owner can feel. Most dogs show few or no clinical signs except for the lymph node enlargement. Other nonspecific signs include lethargy, weakness, a decreased appetite, weight loss, diarrhoea, shortness of breath, difficulty swallowing, increased thirst or increased urination.

Initial diagnosis of lymphoma is determined by either a lymph node aspiration or a biopsy. An aspirate is a relatively non-painful procedure using a small needle to obtain cells to be examined under the microscope. An aspirate can be done quickly and requires no sedation or anaesthesia. Staging of lymphoma is a process recommended for all patients following diagnosis that determines how advanced the cancer is at the time of diagnosis. Commonly ordered tests include a complete blood count, serum chemistry, urinalysis and chest and abdominal x-rays or ultrasound.

The mainstay of lymphoma treatment is combination chemotherapy in which a variety of medications are given according to a specific plan or protocol. Many chemotherapy protocols exist, and they are frequently modified or updated based on client and patient concerns – there is no “one size fits all”. Dogs generally do very well with chemotherapy and do not have as many side effects as people simply because they are given less.

Dogs also seem to have a higher level of tolerance for nausea and typically do not experience the same anxiety associated with chemotherapy treatments that people experience, and if they do adjustments will be made. Often part or all of the protocols can be done by the primary veterinarian, assuming they are comfortable doing that. The general practitioner is most certainly part of the treatment team, which comprises of the owner, the primary vet and the oncology specialist, who together determine the course of treatment.

The goal of treatment of lymphoma is aimed at remission and/or control of the disease and not necessarily a cure. A remission is defined as no external evidence of lymphoma based on the physical exam and laboratory tests, but partial remission and stable disease is also very acceptable, as long as the quality of life of the pet is good.

Without treatment, dogs on average will live 4 to 6 weeks; if placed on prednisone alone, several weeks may be added to this. Dogs with lymphoma have an 80% chance of going into a complete remission when treated with medications and on average, remissions last about a year; some get more, some get less, but all should have a good quality of life throughout the duration of the disease and treatment.

The cost, administration and duration of the medications is very variable, depending on the type and the location of the lymphoma but more importantly based on the patient and owner concerns. Whether there be emotional, financial, time issues or specific patient concerns, there will likely be options available to help the pet attain a stable and likely improved quality for an extended period. However, if options are not available or feasible for any reason, we still have the ability to help our pets and not allow any suffering to be prolonged.

We work closely with your primary care vet to ensure the best possible care for your pet. We understand that frequent long journeys are not always possible and so providing some care locally if your vets are able allows us to ensure that your pets quality of life is as good as it can be.

Our Oncology Department provides specialized oncology consultation and treatment services. We are supported by other specialists that provide diagnostic imaging, internal medicine and emergency/critical care services. We feel it is our obligation to keep the general practitioners and owners apprised of any new developments in cancer therapy and to help them provide optimal cancer care to their clients and patients.

Please give us the opportunity to discuss your pet's disease process and help you come to a decision about your pet's future, whether it be to treat or not to treat. We consider success to be the improvement and/or maintenance of your pet's quality of life for as long as possible, within the limits that you feel are appropriate for you and your pet.