

Cancer in your cat - possible options



Cancer is the uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells. The speed with which a cancer can spread and the severity of the disease it causes depends on the type of tissue cell affected. As many as one in five cats are likely to develop one of the many different forms of cancer at some stage of their lives. The risk of developing cancer increases with age. This means that as cats now enjoy a longer life expectancy through improved veterinary care, the number of animals with cancer has been increasing in recent years.

What causes cancer?

As with human cancers, the causes of cancer in cats are still not well understood. Possible causes include:

- Toxic chemicals or exposure to harmful radiation.
- Feline leukaemia virus (a very common cause in cats).
- Abnormalities in the immune system that usually protects against infectious diseases.
- Abnormal genes.

How do I know if my cat has cancer?

The signs of cancer are very variable and depend on the type of tissue cells involved, the site of the cancer and the stage of the disease. Animals with advanced cancer often show weight loss and loss of appetite. Your cat may be depressed, vomit, have diarrhoea or constipation, or fever. Your cat may also get tired easily because of anaemia. You might also find an unusual lump or swelling on your pet, if so, you should make an appointment for your vet to check it out. Although most lumps are harmless, some can be very dangerous if left untreated.

Is my cat at risk of developing cancer?

Cancer can occur in any animal at any age but certain types of cat are more susceptible to particular forms of cancer. Cats with white fur and skin that like to sunbathe are vulnerable to skin cancers especially on the ears, nose, lips and any other areas where the skin is exposed to direct sunlight. The risk of cancer developing may be reduced by applying sunscreen to areas of exposed white skin/hair on sunny days.

Feline leukaemia virus is the most common cause of cancer in the cat, although not all cats exposed to the virus will develop the disease. Most cats are able to resist the virus but those that cannot, will develop permanent infection and 3 out of 10 of these will get some form of cancer.

Can cancer be treated?

Yes, most forms of cancer can be treated, but this depends on the type of cancer and whether the disease has spread. The outcome of treatment can be very variable. In some cases treatment can produce a complete cure, or at least significantly increase the length or improve the quality of your cat's life. Sometimes euthanasia is the only humane alternative to a slow and painful death.

There are three basic options for treating cancers, not all are appropriate for every case and sometimes a combination of treatments has the best chance of success. The treatment options are:

- **Surgical removal** - usually the best choice for most cancers of solid tissue. If the cancer is relatively benign or if a more malignant cancer has not yet spread to other parts of the body, surgical removal often produces very good results.
- **Chemotherapy** (drug treatment) - the best option for cancers affecting the blood or multiple areas of the body. Drug treatment may also prevent or delay the appearance of secondary tumours in other organs after surgical removal of the original lump. Chemotherapy in cats is used to improve quality of life in pets, and the side effects of chemotherapy seen in people are rarely experienced.
- **Radiotherapy** (x-rays) - often effective when tests have shown clearly the extent and size of the tumour. The radiation is usually delivered by a special machine in a radiotherapy unit. A beam of radiation is most effective on cancers of the extremities (such as the limbs and head) where it is less likely to damage normal tissue before reaching the tumour. Radiotherapy units are only located in a few specialised centres and your vet would need to refer you to a cancer specialist for this form of treatment. In some cases it may be possible to treat the cancer by injecting radioactive material into the body.

Will my cat be in pain?

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Discomfort can be severe when the cancer is advanced, but most cancer-related pain can be controlled. Your vet will probably try a gentle painkiller at first and move on to more powerful drugs if these are required. Your vet will try to improve your cat's quality of life rather than prolonging the life of your cat if it is suffering.

Is diet important?

Careful attention to your cat's diet may improve its quality of life. Cats need extra food to cope with the effects of a fast growing tumour but many cancer patients have a poor appetite and so lose weight. Warming the food or feeding by hand may help stimulate your cat to eat. There are also special diets designed for animals with cancer which provide good nutrition even if your cat's appetite is poor.

How long will my cat live?

This is the question that every owner wants answered but as with human cancer it is impossible for your vet to give you an answer with any confidence. The survival chances will depend not only on the type and stage of the disease but also on your cat's general state of health. You should discuss this issue with your own vet so that you can agree between you an appropriate treatment plan for your cat.

It is understandable that, faced with a diagnosis of cancer, you will feel frightened about the future for your pet - discussing your fears with your vet is the very best way to obtain reassurance and an independent assessment that you are doing what is right for your pet.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact your local Village Vet practice and we will be happy to advise you.