

Ten Things to Do When Your Pet is Diagnosed with Cancer

1. Don't panic!

That's right, don't panic. If you panic, you will become helpless. You and your pet are not helpless against this disease. Cancer is not the same thing as pain, suffering, and death. Nearly 50% of canine cancers are curable with appropriate treatment. For those that are not curable, there are many treatment options available.

2. Take charge!

When faced with a cancer diagnosis it is important to gather as much information as possible in order to make informed decisions about treatment for your pet. Be sure to get the name of the type of cancer (and how to spell it), as well as how sure your veterinarian is of the diagnosis.

3. Consult with a cancer specialist

A specialist in veterinary oncology can help you gather information on your pet's cancer. Many general practice veterinarians do a very good job managing pets with cancer, but they may not have the latest information about treatments available, newer therapies, clinical trials, etc. A cancer specialist has spent extra years training in the treatment of pets with cancer and this experience can help your pet with cancer too. Cancer specialists can take over the cancer care or simply help your veterinarian with medical decisions and treatments.

4. Ask questions

Knowledge is power! The questions that need to be answered in order to determine treatment options are:

- A. What type of cancer does my pet have?
- B. How advanced is the cancer?
- C. What is the typical course of this cancer (i.e. does it spread rapidly or slowly)?
- D. Are there any underlying health issues for my pet that may alter the expected outcome or treatments available?

There may be additional tests that are needed to answer these questions. Once we have the answers to these questions, we can discuss the options available for treatment.

5. List treatment options

When dealing with a diagnosis of cancer, there are very rarely "right" or "wrong" decisions. Options for the treatment of your pet will be given to you. There is often more than one way to treat your pet for the cancer and you will likely have decisions to make as to which treatment option is right for you and your pet. It is important to ask about side effects as well as the benefit of each option. Pets often respond better with much fewer side effects to cancer treatment than people.

6. Set goals for treatment

The goal of cancer treatment is to help your pet have the best quality of life for as long as possible. It is important to consider the goals of therapy when considering side effects. Do you feel that as long as your pet maintains a good quality of life that you want to try

for a cure or remission? If temporary side effects are likely, will this change your decision? Do you feel helping your pet be comfortable for as long as possible is a better treatment option for you?

6. Stay realistic

Don't believe everything you read on the Internet!! Be very careful when searching the Internet for information on your pet's cancer. Just like any subject on the Internet, there is good information and bad information out there. The best information can often be found on veterinary websites or the NIH.

7. Gather your team

It is important to surround yourself with supportive people and the best veterinary medical team. This team should include: your veterinary oncologist, your regular veterinarian, along with an emotional support team to help you through tough times. Non-pet owners often do not understand what you are going through. Often you will hear statements like "It's just a dog" or "why are you spending so much money? Just buy a new one." These statements are usually not meant to be hurtful, but just come from a lack of understanding of the special bond that many people have with their pets. When going through cancer treatment with your pet, remember you are not alone. There are many pet cancer support groups on the web to help people helping their pets with cancer.

8. Take charge!

Do not become overwhelmed with your options. Weight each one carefully and then make your decision. Remember that you always have the option to change your mind. If a treatment is having too many side effects, you can always stop. No one wants the treatment to be worse than the disease!! If you decide to stop a particular treatment, alternatives can be designed to help maximize your pet's quality of life.

9. Be your pet's advocate

You know your pet better than anyone else. You know their habits, emotions, and behavior. You are the most qualified person to assess your pet's needs and quality of life. You are the best person to speak for your pet. A good veterinary team will respect your opinions and wishes.

10. Stay positive

Cancer therapy is bound to have its ups and downs. Remember to communicate with your veterinary team about any changes or concerns you have, but also remember to focus on the here and now. Don't spend hours worrying about what the future may hold. Your pet isn't worrying about it, he or she just wants your attention. So give them all the love you have and celebrate each new day with them!