

10 Disease Warning Signs in Your Pet – Could They Point to a Tumor?

Your pet can develop neoplasia almost anywhere in the body, so symptoms can depend on the tissues and organs involved. Still, make an appointment with your vet if your pet displays any of these 10 warning signs of tumors.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- More dogs and cats are being diagnosed with cancer today
- Signs of neoplasia in pets are also seen in many other disorders and require prompt veterinary attention
- Your pet's immune system is capable of killing cancer cells; however, cancer cells can also mutate in ways that overwhelm the immune system's ability to respond
- If your dog or cat is diagnosed with cancer, partner with an integrative or holistic veterinarian with experience using alternative cancer therapies, including targeted nutrition
- If your pet is healthy, take proactive steps to help him avoid cancer

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The word cancer strikes fear in the heart of every pet parent, and with good reason. While it's too early to label the disease in dogs and cats as an epidemic, we are definitely seeing more cancer in more and younger pets today than at any time in the past.

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), approximately 1 in 4 dogs will develop neoplasia at some point in their lives, and almost half of dogs over the age of 10 will develop cancer. Dogs get cancer at about the same rate as humans.

Unfortunately, there isn't much data available on cancer rates in cats. However, we do know that certain cancers, for example, lymphoma, are more common in kitties than in dogs.

Neoplasia vs. Tumor/Mass vs. Cancer

When we discuss cancer in dogs and cats, it's helpful to understand the meaning of certain commonly used terms. Neoplasia is the medical term used to describe uncontrolled, abnormal growth of cells or tissues in the body; neoplasm describes the abnormal growth itself. Neoplasms can be benign or malignant.

Benign neoplasms often grow slowly and may displace, but don't usually invade surrounding body tissues, nor do they spread to other parts of the body. Malignant neoplasms behave less predictably, grow at various rates (including very rapidly), invade surrounding tissues and spread (metastasize) to other parts of the body.

Other related terms include tumor and mass, both of which are used to describe the physical appearance of a neoplasm. The word cancer is often used in place of neoplasia; however, only malignant neoplasms are technically cancers.

Symptoms of Cancer in Pets

Dogs and cats can develop neoplasia almost anywhere in the body, which is why the symptoms vary depending on the tissues and organs involved and the severity of the neoplasia. Make an appointment with your veterinarian if your pet displays any of the following 10 warning signs of cancer in pets:¹

1. **Unusual swellings that don't go away or that grow** — The best way to discover lumps, bumps or swelling on your dog or cat is to pet him.
2. **Sores that won't heal** — Non-healing sores can be a sign of infection or cancer and should be evaluated by your veterinarian.
3. **Weight loss** — Illness could be the reason your pet is losing weight but isn't on a diet.
4. **Loss of appetite** — Reluctance or refusal to eat is another sign of possible illness.
5. **Bleeding or discharge** — Bleeding can occur for a number of reasons, most of which signal a problem. Unexplained vomiting and diarrhea are considered abnormal discharges, as well.
6. **Offensive smell** — An unpleasant odor is a common sign of tumors of the anus, mouth or nose.
7. **Difficulty eating or swallowing** — This is a common sign of cancers of the mouth or neck.
8. **Reluctance to exercise or low energy level** — This is often one of the first signs that a pet is not feeling well.
9. **Persistent lameness** — There can be many causes of lameness, including nerve, muscle or bone cancer.
10. **Difficulty breathing, urinating or defecating** — These symptoms should be evaluated by your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Many of these symptoms also occur with other disorders and diseases, but regardless, any pet showing one or more of these signs needs prompt veterinary attention. As with any disease, the earlier your dog or cat is diagnosed, the better the chances of a positive outcome.

Cancer and Your Pet's Immune System

Dr. Nancy Scanlan has done a great deal of pet cancer research. In a 2017 interview, she provided an easy-to-understand explanation of the interaction between the immune system and cancer:

"If everything is going well the immune system fights off cancer with two or three main types of cells. There are the macrophages, which are sort of general garbage eaters. There are natural killer cells. They don't just eat, they destroy. They look for abnormal cells."

The third type is the cytotoxic killer cell. These cells are primed to destroy a specific kind of cell. The way they get primed is the macrophages eat the cells and present pieces of them to the cytotoxic killer cells, which teaches the killer cells which type of cell to look for and destroy."

Unfortunately, sometimes cancer cells are able to hide to avoid being attacked by immune system cells. One way they hide is by coating themselves. This prevents the immune system from seeing the markers that tell it the cancer cells are abnormal.

"When you have abnormal cells, there are little markers on the outside that inform the immune system they are cancer," said Dr. Scanlan. "Also, cancer cells are constantly mutating, and the mutations have new kinds of markers. So even if the older cancer cells are hiding, new ones constantly appear and the immune system can recognize those as a problem."

Another way the cells hide is by producing a specific antibody that prevents the immune system from recognizing them as cancer.

"Cancer is so inventive," Dr. Scanlan explained. "It mutates so much that sooner or later there's an overwhelming population of cells the body can't handle, or the population is so dangerous and destroys so much tissue the body can't handle it. Even though the immune system is successfully fighting against, say, 90 percent of the cancer cells, the remaining 10 percent gradually develops into the final, fatal disease."

If Your Pet Has Been Diagnosed with Cancer

Dr. Scanlan offers two specific recommendations to support the immune system in pets diagnosed with cancer:

"[No. 1] is the whole mushroom family. There are a number of mushroom products out there. Research on mushrooms shows they actually stimulate the cells of the immune system in ways that are similar to immuno-augmentative therapy in humans. They make immune system cells stronger, more active, and able to make more chemical messengers.

[No. 2]: Chinese herbs that specifically stimulate the immune system. In Chinese medicine, it's called Wei [Qi]. In addition, there are herbs that actually have specific effects on cancer cells — herbs in the astragalus family or Chinese medicine with astragalus as part of the formula, along with formulas that include red clover, essiac and hoxsey. Holistic vets are familiar with these products. We try to use the ones that have the most scientific support behind them."

If your dog or cat is diagnosed with cancer, or you're concerned about your pet's future health, team up with an integrative or holistic veterinarian, as most conventional vets have very limited knowledge in the use of **targeted nutrition**, supplements and other alternative treatments for cancer.

If there's no suitable veterinarian in your area, keep in mind that some holistic veterinarians also do phone consultations. Finding an integrative veterinary oncologist can also be important, when it comes to slowing certain types of cancers.

All the supplements in the world won't fix a poor diet that may be contributing to the growth of cancer cells. Transitioning your pet to a raw, species-appropriate diet rich in antioxidants, healthy fats and fatty acids, and ultra-low carbohydrates is a critical piece of a cancer treatment protocol.

Digital filmmaker Rodney Habib has produced a documentary about using a ketogenic diet as a profound metabolic strategy to slow or stop aggressive canine cancers.

If you can't make a homemade, ketogenic diet, it's recommended you buy a commercially available, fresh food diet designed to fight cancer. From there, your dog or cat may benefit from adjunctive therapies like hyperbaric oxygen therapy, IV antioxidant therapy, medicinal mushrooms and other natural substances, which your integrative veterinarian can recommend.

5 Ways to Reduce Your Pet's Cancer Risk

1. **Don't allow your dog or cat to become overweight** — Studies show that restricting the amount of calories an animal eats prevents and/or delays the progression of tumor development across species. Fewer calories cause the cells of the body to block tumor growth, whereas too many calories can lead to obesity, and obesity is closely linked to increased cancer risk in humans.

There is a connection between too much glucose, increased insulin sensitivity, inflammation and oxidative stress — all factors in obesity — and cancer. It's important to remember that fat doesn't just sit on your pet's body harmlessly. It produces inflammation that can promote tumor development.

2. **Feed an anti-inflammatory diet** — Anything that creates or promotes inflammation in the body increases the risk for cancer. Current research suggests cancer is actually a chronic inflammatory disease, fueled by carbohydrates. The inflammatory process creates an environment in which abnormal cells proliferate.

Cancer cells require the glucose in carbohydrates to grow and multiply, so you want to eliminate that cancer energy source. Carbs to remove from your pet's diet include processed grains, fruits with fructose and starchy vegetables like potatoes. Keep in mind that all dry pet food contains some form of starch. It may be grain-free, but it can't be starch-free because it's not possible to manufacture kibble without using some type of starch.

Cancer cells generally can't use dietary fats for energy, so high amounts of good-quality fats are nutritionally beneficial for dogs fighting cancer, along with a reduced amount of protein and no carbs.

Another major contributor to inflammatory conditions is a diet too high in omega-6 fatty acids and too low in omega-3s. Omega-6s increase inflammation while the omega-3s do the reverse. Processed pet food is typically loaded with omega-6 fatty acids and deficient in omega-3s.

A healthy diet for your pet — one that is anti-inflammatory and anticancer — consists of real, whole foods, preferably raw. It should include high-quality protein, including muscle meat, organs and bone. It should also include high amounts of animal fat, high levels of EPA and DHA (omega-3 fatty acids), and a few fresh cut, low-glycemic veggies. This species-appropriate diet is high in moisture content and contains no grains or starches.

I also recommend making sure the diet is balanced following the ancestral diet recommendations, which have much more rigorous standards (higher amounts of minerals and vitamins) than our current dietary

recommendations for pets (AAFCO). A few beneficial supplements like probiotics, medicinal mushrooms, digestive enzymes and super green foods can also be very beneficial to enhance immune function.

3. **Reduce or eliminate your pet's exposure to toxins** — These include chemical pesticides like flea and tick preventives, lawn chemicals (weed killers, herbicides, etc.), tobacco smoke, flame retardants and household cleaners (detergents, soaps, cleansers, dryer sheets, room deodorizers).

Because we live in a toxic world and avoiding all chemical exposure is nearly impossible, offer a periodic detoxification protocol to your pet.

4. **If your pet is a dog, especially a large or giant breed, hold off neutering or spaying until the age of 18 months to 2 years** — Studies have linked spaying and neutering to increasing cancer rates in dogs. Even better, investigate alternative ways to sterilize your pet without upsetting his or her important hormone balance.
5. **Refuse unnecessary vaccinations** — Vaccine protocols should be tailored to minimize risk and maximize protection, taking into account the breed, background, nutritional status, lifestyle and overall vitality of the pet.

Sources and References

AVMA.org

¹ Phys.org May 15, 2014
