

What is canine lymphoma?

Lymphoma is the most common malignant cancer in dogs. Lymphoma is a cancer of lymphocytes, which are white blood cells that are part of the immune system and reside most commonly in the lymph nodes, bone marrow, and spleen. The cause of lymphoma is unknown at this time. Most dogs initially present with multiple, enlarged, non-painful lymph nodes. There are many lymph nodes throughout the body (ones that we can palpate, and others that we need radiographs or ultrasound to view). There are 5 stages of lymphoma. The most common stages that dogs have are stage 3 (where the lymph nodes that can be felt under the skin are involved) or stage 4 (liver and/or spleen involvement with enlarged lymph nodes).

What signs of illness do most dogs with Lymphoma show?

Most dogs with lymphoma do not have specific clinical signs or signs of illness. In fact most dogs show no signs of illness when the disease is first diagnosed. Owners most commonly notice “lumps” under the neck, which are a result of lymph node enlargement. Signs that can occur with this disease include lethargy, decreased appetite, diarrhea, vomiting, possibly coughing/wheezing, increased water intake and urination.

How is a diagnosis made and what tests are needed?

A needle aspirate taken from an enlarged lymph node is usually sufficient to obtain a diagnosis of lymphoma. Several diagnostic tests are recommended to define the extent to which lymphoma is affecting major organs in a dog. These tests are referred to as “staging” tests and include blood and urine tests, chest radiographs, abdominal radiographs or ultrasound, and special staining of the lymph node aspirates. Special stains of the lymph node provide a determination of the specific form of lymphoma (B cell versus T cell).

How is lymphoma treated?

Lymphoma is one of the most treatable malignant cancers in dogs. Lymphoma rarely exists in a single organ or location it is often described as a “systemic” (body-wide) disease. Chemotherapy is considered the primary choice of treatment. Approximately 80-90% of dogs will respond to chemotherapy treatment and have all signs of the lymphoma disappear for a period of time. This resolution of signs related to lymphoma is referred to as the remission.

There are many different protocols for treatment, but the “gold standard” is multi-agent chemotherapy, consisting of a combination of five different chemotherapy agents including prednisone. These treatments are administered on a weekly or every other week basis for 18-24 weeks. A reasonable goal following the use of such a chemotherapy protocol is for dogs to have a remission duration of 1 year. For dogs who have all signs of lymphoma disappear in the first 4 weeks therapy it is reasonable for the remission to continue for 2 years.

Are there other treatment options for Lymphoma?

There are less intensive treatment protocols for lymphoma. These protocols are less expensive and less frequently administered; however, they are not as effective (6-10 months may be a good outcome with these protocols).

What if we do not want to pursue treatment?

Without any treatment, most dogs with lymphoma will succumb to the disease in 1-2 months. Prednisone is well tolerated and a relatively inexpensive drug that can be used alone as a treatment for lymphoma. It may allow your pet to feel better. If used alone for the management of lymphoma, the median survival time is 75-90 days. The use of prednisone alone before chemotherapy may result in a decrease in the effectiveness of future conventional chemotherapy in your pet.

Will chemotherapy make my dog sick?

The treatments for lymphoma are well tolerated by most dogs. Mild cases of vomiting, diarrhea and anorexia can occur 48-72 hours after chemotherapy. Most of these cases resolve within 24 hours. However, 10% percent of dogs may experience repeated vomiting that requires evaluation by a veterinarian. For the vast majority of dogs no hospitalization is needed to manage these mild side effects.

Less common side effects include a reduction of the white blood cell count following chemotherapy treatment. One (1%) percent of dogs will have life-threatening complications that are associated with marked reduction in white blood cells and the subsequent risk for infection. Blood tests are routinely performed prior to chemotherapy, and again at specific time-points following chemotherapy to monitor the white blood cell, red blood cell, and platelet counts. Medications, including antibiotics are often administered prophylactically or if the white blood cells counts become too low.

Some thinning of the hair coat may occur, but is not common in most dogs. Dogs that have continuous hair growth are more susceptible to alopecia (hair loss) such as Poodles or Old English Sheepdogs.

What is the goal of therapy?

While it is rare to cure your pet from this disease, canine lymphoma is one of the most responsive cancers to chemotherapy and we can usually achieve remission with a good quality of life for your pet. Our goal with chemotherapy is to get your pet into remission for as long as possible while maintaining optimal quality of life.

The decision to pursue treatment for this disease is dependent on several factors:

- (1) The goal of treatment;
- (2) The risks you are comfortable with;
- (3) The cost of treatment;

We will work with you to develop an individualized treatment protocol that meets the balance of these factors.