





Dr. Gerald Post, nationally recognized veterinary oncologist.

Your vet will have some courses of treatment available, but you may need to seek the expertise of veterinary specialists. The Veterinary Cancer Center (VCC) in Norwalk, Connecticut, is one such practice whose only mission is to treat cancer in pets. The 8,000-square-foot center is the "largest standalone veterinary cancer facility that encompasses a range of treatment therapies." It's also the regional center for clinical trials. Dr. Gerald Post, a nationally recognized veterinary oncologist at the VCC, offers some advice and insight into the world of treating canine cancer patients, what signs to be on the lookout for, and what you should consider if a cancer diagnosis is made. The objective for treatment is simple: "We focus on quantity and quality of life and want to achieve both, not one or the other."



### **10 WARNING SIGNS**

Some of the most common types of cancers seen in canines include *lymphoma*, *mast cell tumors*, *melanoma*, *multiple myeloma*, and *appendicular osteosarcoma*. More information about these cancers – and their diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis – is available at *www.vcchope.com*. Every cancer has "warning signs," and every dog will not show the same set of symptoms for a particular cancer. Here is a list of the 10 most common cancer symptoms:

- **1. Swollen lymph nodes** that are enlarged or firm should be evaluated or biopsied.
- **2. A lump, bump, or nodule** that changes rapidly such as flat to raised, change in color, small to large, or large to small. "If something has been around a long time, the less likely it will be a problem," says Dr. Post.
- **3. Abdominal distention or enlarged abdomen** could be a sign of blood or fluid building up. Says Dr. Post, "I'm not talking about the typical weight gain; this is rapid onset."
- **4. Chronic weight loss.** "If you're not putting your pet on a diet or regulating its eating habits, and it's eating the normal amount but still losing weight, that needs to be investigated."
- **5. Chronic vomiting or diarrhea** that lasts for an extended period of time and is unexplainable. For instance, you know that your Lab did not get into the household products under the sink or gobbled up the leftover chocolate cake on the counter.
- 6. Bleeding from the nose, mouth, genitals, or rectum that has no obvious causes such as a cut or any other trauma. Blood in the urine is also another symptom that should prompt you to take your Lab to the vet.
- 7. Cough in an older pet. "If the dog has not been around younger dogs [from whom the older dog could contract pneumonia] or kenneled recently [where the dog could contract kennel couch], go to the vet," recommends Dr. Post.
- **8. Lameness** that occurs all of a sudden, especially in large or giant breed dogs. Dr. Post says this sign needs to be taken seriously because it could be a sign of bone cancer, which is a common disease among Labradors.
- 9. Straining to urinate or defecate.
- **10. Abnormal odor from mouth.** Dogs can have pretty stinky breath, especially if they like to eat certain "treats" and don't receive oral care very often. But this is a different sort of stench: "Tumors can get quite large because we're normally feeling the outside of the dog and don't explore their mouths very often," says Dr. Post. Brushing your dog's teeth regularly and examining the inside of the mouth will bring problems to your attention sooner.

These signs are normally first recognized by the owner, who then makes an appointment with their pet's regular

## **Comparative Oncology**

Comparative oncology, according to **www.vcchope.com**, is "the study of naturally occurring cancer in humans and companion animals." Dr. Post explains that the VCC, though focused on canine cancer, contributes to comparative oncology by working with a couple foundations conducting such research, including the Animal Cancer Fund.

The VCC is not alone. Several universities and professional institutions across the country that have developed comparative oncology programs often work in collaboration with other research facilities and foundations. Diagnostic and therapeutic discoveries are further assessed in clinical trials and studies to see if there is a clinical application to which those discoveries can apply. In this way, the strides in diagnosing, treating, and curing cancer can cross over disciplines and perhaps more effectively, now and in the future, treat those canines and humans afflicted with cancer.



DIANE LEWIS PHOTO

veterinarian. Dr. Post could not stress enough how important the local veterinarians are in caring for pets and their role in preventative care. Nearly 100 percent of patients at the VCC were referred, by request, by their regular veterinarian. "I strongly recommend having a general veterinarian because they're so important to the care of the pet. There really needs to be a person to look at the pet and who knows the pet," says Dr. Post. The cooperation and respect veterinary professionals

have toward one another helps to give owners peace of mind and the security that everything is being done for their pet.

#### What Owners Should Consider

"Our goal is to make sure that all pets get the best treatment the owners can afford," says Dr. Post. And he's not just speaking about finances. Finances, of course, are a big part of the decision. Cancer

Just Labs





treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, and surgery are costly, and the level of care and expertise that specialized offices such as the VCC provide can also raise the price tag. VCC does offer financial assistance and counseling, however, and the current patients cover a range of financial ability. Dr. Post identifies three additional "constraints" that can inhibit owners from pursuing cancer treatment.

- **1. Time:** The length of treatments, the number of treatments, the availability of the owner to attend appointments are all part of "time."
- **2. Distance:** "We get people from all over," says Dr. Post. On the day of the interview, he had an appointment with someone from Mexico.
- **3. Emotions:** Some owners may not be able to handle an extended course of treatment, or be so broken up or stressed about their dog's condition and well-being, which can make it difficult for them to continue treatment.



March/April 2013



He says the VCC team always strives to work within these constraints. When asked what the most important and primary consideration should be when treating a patient, Dr. Post replies without hesitation, "What would I do for my own pet, and what's the best [thing to do] for your pet?" The team at the VCC educates the owners on every available option, and then helps guide the owners to a course of treatment. You know your Lab best and know how much he/she can take. You know yourself best and how much you can take. Consider what's in the best interest for your pet. If you have these things in mind, you will be better able to come to the right decision.

#### Hope

The word "cancer" strikes fear into the hearts of pet owners everywhere, but understanding and treating canine cancer has made significant leaps and bounds over the past two decades. This will continue at a faster rate now that the canine genome has been sequenced. "We're in the early research stages of genomic research in dogs. We can now examine if the disease is a question of, is this dog related or breed related or familial related? We can know this now, and it's wonderful," explains Dr. Post. "Once we know more about the genetics of cancer, we will be better able to target diagnostics as well as therapeutics." Unlocking the canine genome gives both veterinarians and pet owners hope that potential new and better targeted treatments and, ultimately, cures, are in the future.

Today there are several diagnostic and therapeutic options available, and an increasing interest by pet owners to do whatever it takes to provide their pets a quality life for as long as the pet lives. "If there's one thing you should know, it's that cancer is not a death sentence," says Dr. Post positively, as he has seen plenty of cases of canines bouncing back and going into remission.

There are options for treatment. There is hope for recovery. It's also important to remember, regardless if your dog has cancer, to take a lesson from your Lab: take things in stride, think of only the best, and enjoy every moment.



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