

CANINE LYMPHOMA

Canine lymphoma (lymphosarcoma) is a cancer arising predominantly in the lymph glands of the body. In some dogs, this may occur at only one or two sites in the body but, more commonly, it is widespread involving all the lymph glands and internal organs. Lymphoma is a progressive and ultimately fatal disease unless treated. In the early stages, the patient may be well but the cancer can have a profound effect on the dog causing weakness, poor appetite, loss of weight and general poor health. Currently, the cause of canine lymphoma is not known. However, it is not a contagious disease and there is no chance of spread to other pets or to humans.

Without treatment, the average survival time is about 4-6 weeks. In some rare cases it may take several months to progress. With treatment, the majority of patients will go into remission (i.e. the tumour is reduced to such a small size that it is no longer apparent). This remission can be long lasting but unfortunately, lymphoma is rarely cured outright.

Treatment possibilities vary from basic drugs to complicated protocols using a variety of drugs. The principal and most important goal of any treatment is to regain and maintain a good quality of life. For the majority of dogs the drugs that are used have minimal to no side effects.

Steroids alone will achieve a partial response in many dogs but they will relapse within 2 - 3 months due to drug resistance. For a longer and more complete response, combination drug therapy is used. Using a basic three-drug protocol of cyclophosphamide, vincristine and prednisolone a good response can be achieved in three-quarters of cases with an average survival of 7 - 9 months (a small percentage reach 2 years) and relatively few side effects. More advanced multi-drug protocols that include doxorubicin exist. They can achieve a better remission rate with a longer average survival of 12-14 months with some dogs reaching two years. However, these regimens are more involved, can have more side effects and tend to be more expensive.

Side effects from the anticancer drugs are not common; in general, the quality of life for most veterinary patients receiving cancer treatment is good and often normal. Many dogs that were ill because of the lymphoma will actually improve dramatically as their tumour comes under control. While it is important to be aware of the potential side effects of chemotherapy, the majority of our patients complete their treatment without significant complications. Most of the time they can lead full happy lives and have fun with the families that love and care for them.

The first aim of therapy is always quality of life and, second to that, for a 'worthwhile' period. Your vet may want to refer you to a cancer specialist for more advanced treatments and, indeed, you can ask to be referred.

Contact details for the Animal Cancer Trust

Animal Cancer Trust

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