

MAMMARY TUMOURS IN DOGS

Mammary tumours are common in middle aged and older entire bitches. Although the majority of mammary tumours are benign, a significant number are malignant and potentially life threatening.

What causes mammary tumours?

Mammary tumours occur in mammary glands that have been exposed to female hormones. They are very rare in male dogs and in bitches spayed (ovario-hysterectomy) before their first heat. In Britain spaying before the first heat is uncommon but so long as this operation is performed before the second heat the number of bitches that develop mammary tumours is still very low. Mammary tumours in bitches are almost preventable. In general, any bitch that is not going to be used for breeding is best spayed before its second heat to prevent mammary cancer and diseases of the uterus.

How could mammary tumours affect my dog?

Whether they are benign or malignant, tumours of the mammary glands will grow and may become ulcerated, infected and painful. Benign tumours tend to grow slowly whereas mammary cancers tend to be more aggressive. However, growth rate and what they look like are not always good indicators of actual type and behaviour.

Mammary tumours can occur as single lumps, several at one time or over a period of time. Benign tumours are more frequently multiple BUT this is not a guarantee that one of the lumps is not malignant.

Malignant mammary tumours are potentially life threatening. Not only can they grow quickly and become ulcerated, but around 50 per cent will undergo secondary spread to other parts of the body. These secondaries are very difficult to treat and will continue to grow until they are causing major problems and ultimately will be fatal.

If a lump starts growing in the mammary gland then it is always best to ask your vet to look at it before it grows further. Small tumours are easier to treat and potentially more curable than large ulcerating masses.

What treatments are there?

Surgical removal of the tumour when it is small (less than 2 centimetres) has the best chance of curing the patient. Usually a biopsy is not required but if your veterinary surgeon is concerned this may be performed first. If there are multiple lumps then several incisions may be required or one larger area. Malignant tumours will grow into the surrounding tissue. So long as some of the normal tissue is removed with the tumour there is a good chance that a local cure can be achieved.

However, surgery will not reverse secondary spread if it has occurred. The longer a malignant tumour is left, the bigger it will grow and the greater the chance of secondary spread occurring. Currently there is no effective treatment against secondary mammary cancer. Anticancer drugs (chemotherapy) and hormone antagonists (e.g. tamoxifen) are frequently used in women with breast cancer

with good effect; however these drugs do not appear to be very effective in bitches.

If my bitch has a mammary cancer what is the prognosis?

In general, so long as the mammary tumour is removed when it is small, the prognosis is good for the majority of bitches. Larger tumours, especially if they are malignant, are much more problematic and there is an increased chance that fatal secondaries will develop.

Contact details for the Animal Cancer Trust

Animal Cancer Trust

5 Flag Business Exchange, Vicarage Farm Road, Peterborough, PE1 5TX

Telephone no: 08701 644225

Email: info@animalcancertrust.org.uk

Website: www.animalcancertrust.org.uk

Registered Charity no 1094779