

MAST CELL TUMOURS IN DOGS

Mast cell tumours are one of the commonest skin tumours seen in dogs. There is great variation in what mast cell tumours look like and how they will behave. Their behaviour varies from almost benign, slow growing, low-grade tumours at the one end of the scale to very aggressive, high-grade cancers at the other end. Mast cell tumours at the least aggressive end of the scale are, for the main, potentially curable whereas the aggressive ones are frequently fatal. In order to get an idea of a likely prognosis and to give the most appropriate treatment, we need to know which end of the spectrum we are dealing with.

Assessment of degree of malignancy

The best way of assessing how the tumour will behave is to have it examined by a pathologist. The pathologist uses a grading system based on the microscopic appearance and this actually correlates quite well with the clinical behaviour at the two extremes of the spectrum. The three grades are a) well-differentiated, b) intermediate differentiation and c) poorly differentiated.

The term “well differentiated” correlates with the least aggressive form. Less than 5% of these ever spread anywhere else in the body and the vast majority are curable by surgery, radiotherapy or a combination.

What the pathologist call “poorly differentiated” tumours are the very aggressive forms. At least 80% of dogs will develop secondaries elsewhere and the majority of patients will die as a result of the tumour at some time. Treatment is aimed at delaying the onset of the advanced state but cures are uncommon.

Unfortunately there is a large number that the pathologist is not able to categorise and will call “intermediate grade”. Most of these are actually not very aggressive and only 15-20% will undergo spread elsewhere. Put another way, 80-85% are potentially curable.

Treatment options

The first aim of cancer treatment is to control the primary tumour, remove it and prevent local recurrence. The second aim is to reduce the rate at which secondary tumours develop.

As a rule, surgery has the best chance of curing any tumour; for some tumours, local excision is curative but for others a very wide margin beyond the apparent mass is required to deal with any infiltrating fingers. For mast cell tumours, relatively local surgery can be curative for the well-differentiated (least aggressive); whereas the intermediate differentiation have widely infiltrating fingers that require bigger surgery.

Where wide surgery is not feasible (e.g. lower limb or skin of face), there will be a high chance of recurrence with intermediate grade mast cell tumours (at least 50%). However, if radiotherapy is used after surgery it is possible to cure many more

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