

Mast Cell Tumours

What is a mast cell tumour?

Mast cells are normal cells within the body that are responsible for allergic reactions. These cells can become cancerous, growing in an uncontrolled way on, or just under, the skin. This can happen in any breed of dog, but some breeds are predisposed: e.g. boxers, golden retrievers, bulldogs, pugs, Boston terriers, and cocker spaniels. Mast cell tumours can also spread to internal organs, such as the bone marrow, liver or spleen. Animals with mast cell tumours therefore often need a range of diagnostic tests to confirm whether or not the tumour has spread.

What is the outlook (prognosis)?

Mast cell tumour behaviour (e.g. tendency to recur or to spread elsewhere in the body) is very variable but can be predicted to some extent based on the grade of the tumour. Tumours can be graded by a pathologist after surgical removal or biopsy. There are 3 grades of tumour.

- Grade I (low grade) is the least aggressive. If these are removed surgically and the surgery is successful in removing all of the cancer cells from the area, then cure is very likely.
- Grade II (intermediate grade) tumours are more aggressive and can spread to the bone marrow, spleen, liver or local lymph node. If there is no visible spread at the time of surgery, 50% of dogs may still develop recurrence within 10 months. After surgery, if no recurrence is detected within this 10 month period, there is a very good chance of the dog being cured. However, it is possible for new mast cell tumours, unrelated to the first one, to develop in the future.
- Grade III (high grade) tumours are the most aggressive. These tumours are very serious indeed and sadly 97% of dogs will survive less than 1 year due to spread of the cancer to the internal organs.

For some of these tumours, location on the body may be important. Tumours in the groin, armpit, lip, vulva, and anus may be more aggressive than tumours in other areas.

What treatment is possible?

Treatment usually involves surgery, radiotherapy or chemotherapy or a combination of these. Surgery to remove the tumour and allow grading tends to be the first line of treatment. Grade I tumours tend not to require any additional treatment. For grade II tumours, radiation therapy after surgery may be recommended, as long as the cancer has not spread to other body organs. For dogs with grade III tumours or tumours in the groin or tumours that have spread, chemotherapy and other medications may be advised, in addition to surgery and radiation.

Will my pet experience side effects with chemotherapy?

Some animals experience side effects with chemotherapy but these are generally mild and either resolve spontaneously or with minimal treatment. The clinician looking after your pet will always try to choose the drug or combination of drugs that will cause the fewest side effects, whilst being the most effective. The aim is that the pet should feel as well as possible during chemotherapy. The potential for side effects is always balanced against the benefit of the chemotherapy and the consequences of the cancer itself.

This information sheet has been adapted from a client information sheet by Rosenberg in Ettinger's Textbook of Veterinary Internal Medicine, 5th edition



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