

Dealing with Life's Lumps & Bumps

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Like it or not, sooner or later your pet will more than likely develop a "lump," "bump," or "growth" somewhere on its body. While your initial reaction to the discovery may be panic, don't go into automatic paranoia unnecessarily. Lumps are more appropriately referred to as tumors. There are generally two classes of tumors. Benign tumors are those that tend to be relatively nondestructive to surrounding tissues and tend not to spread to distant sites in the body. Malignant tumors, on the other hand, typically are very destructive to surrounding tissues, and have the ability to spread to other areas of the body.

It is always best to have any unusual lump checked by a veterinarian. Often he or she can give you a pretty good idea what type of tumor you are dealing with. It is imperative that we know whether we are dealing with a benign or malignant tumor before we decide on a course of action. Some of the factors which help us decide which we are dealing with include location, shape, size, color, rate of growth, recent change in appearance, and "feel" of the tumor. As a general rule, masses on the extremities, in the oral cavity, and inside body cavities have a higher likelihood of being malignant. Those masses which are firm, grow rapidly, or are ulcerated or bleeding on their surface also are of greater concern. Ultimately, identification and definitive diagnosis of most tumors requires a biopsy.

Once a tumor is confirmed by a veterinarian, you, as the pet owner, have three general options:

Observe- Masses which have a high likelihood of being benign can be watched carefully over time for any changes in appearance or size. (This is the very least that should be done for any mass.)

Aspirate- Aspiration is no more than inserting a needle into a mass and withdrawing a small sampling of representative cells and examining them under a microscope. This will allow the veterinarian to evaluate the cell type. While it is not as conclusive as a biopsy, in many cases it is sufficient when considered along with all other factors (some tumors can be positively diagnosed by this method alone).

Removal (biopsy)- This is by far the most aggressive, but generally the most likely to result in proper treatment or "cure" of the tumor. Biopsies are generally performed with the pet anesthetized (occasionally local anesthesia can be used). Biopsies allow the veterinarian to identify the tumor type and grade (aggressiveness). Based on the diagnosis, prognostic information can be given to the pet owner, and the most appropriate treatment regimen offered. Sometimes small skin tumors can be removed cryosurgically (the tumor is "frozen") but when this is done biopsy of that mass is no longer possible.

In some instances, the biopsy may confirm that the tumor is benign. In that case, the surgery should be curative. Some of the most common benign tumors in the dog include lipomas (fatty tumors), papillomas (warts), and sebaceous adenomas ("cheese" tumors).

In other instances the tumor may be malignant, but the surgery alone may be curative (all the tumor appears to have been removed.) And sometimes, the tumor is malignant, but likely to be spread to other sites in the body. Some of the more common malignant tumors of dogs include osteosarcomas (bone tumors), melanomas, fibrosarcomas, hemangiosarcomas, and squamous cell carcinomas. There are obviously many more types of both benign and malignant tumors.

Different types of malignant tumors respond to treatment differently, Some types are particularly sensitive to radiation. Others respond to various chemotherapy regimens. And, unfortunately, some do not respond at all. Only you, along with your veterinarian, can decide what course to take regarding any lumps you might find on your pet. It is critical, though, that you do have them checked out.

Never feel silly about questioning any lumps or bumps you may find on your pet. It just may be that you will save his life.