



MALIGNANT MELANOMA (AND MELANOMA VACCINE INFO)

Malignant melanoma is the most common tumor in the mouth of the dog. Although only about 10% of patients have spread of the cancer to locations other than the mouth at the time of diagnosis, nearly 100% of dogs with this cancer will eventually die from new lesions in the lungs or other organ systems (metastasis). Therefore, the treatment of malignant melanoma must address two issues: eliminate or control the cancer at the original site, and prevent metastasis.

STAGING

Staging includes a series of tests to determine how far cancer has spread in a patient. Most dogs require anesthesia to allow thorough examination of the mouth and to prevent movement while imaging the mouth. A CT scan may be necessary to determine whether the tumor is invading into nearby bone.

In addition to learning how locally invasive a tumor may be, other areas of the body are examined for metastasis. Small samples of external lymph nodes can be taken with a needle. Radiographs of the chest can detect tumor colonies in the lungs.

TREATING THE LESION IN THE MOUTH

Surgery is the traditional treatment for melanoma. Surgery may involve removing only soft tissue such as lip, tongue, or gum tissue, but some melanomas can extend into the bone of the jaw or the roof of the mouth. Aggressive surgery removing a segment of bone can be performed with only minor changes in your dog's appearance, and most dogs are comfortable and begin eating within 24 hours following the surgery.

Radiation therapy involves a series of 3 to 6 treatments, exposing the tumor site to a high-energy radiation beam. The beam must be precisely aimed, requiring a brief anesthesia for each treatment. Often, a dose of chemotherapy will be used to increase the sensitivity of the cancer cells to radiation. Radiation therapy has been shown to be very effective for incompletely removed melanomas. Radiation therapy can also be performed on tumors that are too large to be surgically removed.

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OTHER MELANOMAS

Melanomas can begin in locations other than the mouth. Other common locations include the toes and skin. Treatment options for these locations are similar and usually involve surgical removal of the tumor. These tumors also have a potential to spread to other parts of body. The digital melanomas have a 57% metastatic rate, while most of the cutaneous melanomas in other locations do not metastasize.

PREVENTION OF NEW LESIONS

With any local treatment of the cancer, most dogs with malignant melanoma in the mouth eventually develop disease in new areas *even when no other disease is found at the time of diagnosis*.

Immunotherapy: Promising new technology has led to a melanoma vaccine – the first DNA-based vaccine for cancer in animals or humans. This vaccine alerts the immune system to the presence of melanoma proteins, which results in the immune system fighting the cancer cells. In conjunction with surgery and/or radiation to treat the initial tumor, this immune response may help extend the survival time in dogs.

Chemotherapy is used to prevent or delay spread of this disease to other parts of the body. The most common drug used is called Carboplatin. This drug is given as an injection every 3 weeks.

Throughout the treatments, the tumor is monitored for local recurrence and/or spread by examining your pet and taking x-rays of the lungs.

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