



LYMPHOMA IN CATS

Lymphoma (also known as Lymphosarcoma and Non-Hodgkins Disease) is a cancer of the lymphatic tissue. Lymphatic tissue is a filtration network of vessels and lymph nodes that returns fluids from the body to the blood stream. Feline lymphoma may be caused by activity of the Feline Leukemia Virus. Most cats do *not* have an active (detectable) virus infection at the time of diagnosis; only cats with active virus are contagious.

DIAGNOSIS

Lymphoma is most commonly found in the digestive tract, lymph nodes, and chest cavity of cats, although *any* body system can be affected. Common signs of lymphoma in cats include weight loss, vomiting and/or diarrhea, painless enlargement of the lymph nodes, and difficulty breathing. Other cats will have signs of illness from the effects of cancer cells invading normal body tissues. Samples of affected lymph node, bone marrow, or other tissues must be examined under a microscope to diagnose lymphoma. During treatment, blood tests help us monitor for side effects from therapy. Blood tests cannot diagnose lymphoma unless the cancer cells are actually present in the blood stream (leukemia).

PREVENTION

Vaccination can help prevent feline leukemia virus infection. Vaccination will not help if your cat already has lymphoma.

TREATMENT

Chemotherapy: Lymphoma is not curable, but therapy can reduce the severity of clinical signs and add quality time to your cat's life. Chemotherapy is the most effective form of therapy for lymphoma. You may be familiar with the side effects of chemotherapy in people. Fortunately, cats rarely experience the severe side effects seen in people. For instance, cats do not lose hair from chemotherapy, although their long whiskers may be lost.

Chemotherapy is the use of medications to interrupt the growth of cancer cells. The medications which are effective in stopping the growth of lymphoma cells will also interrupt the normal replacement of cells which line the digestive tract and the white blood cells which form in the bone marrow to help our bodies fight infection. When chemotherapy drugs damage these normal cells, symptoms can range from a mild, temporary decrease in appetite to loose stools, vomiting, and fever. Again, most cats have no symptoms; others improve with simple drug store remedies such as Pepcid AC. Stronger prescription medications including appetite stimulants and antibiotics are sometimes needed, but less than 1 in 10 patients requires a return visit to the hospital because of side effects. *Our philosophy is that cancer patients should feel better, not worse, from their therapy.*

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When cats with lymphoma are treated with chemotherapy, the results are usually dramatic. For most patients, the lymphoma generally disappears into remission (dormancy) within one or two weeks of treatment. A microscopic amount of the cancer remains, but the patient has no signs and enjoys a normal quality of life. Many cats seem to feel better than before the cancer was diagnosed! Eventually the remaining cancer cells begin to divide and symptoms reappear, but most cats return into remission with acceleration of their treatment. Unfortunately, the cancer cells eventually develop *resistance*, the ability to escape damage from the chemotherapy drugs. When lymphoma becomes resistant to chemotherapy, or when patients do not receive treatment for the disease, the cancer overwhelms the rest of the body. Signs include severe lethargy, poor appetite, difficulty breathing, and eventual death.

Most chemotherapy medications must be given as intravenous (IV) injections. Other medications are available as tablets and can be given at home. Although many medications can control lymphoma for short periods of time, chemotherapy is most effective against lymphoma when combinations of different drugs are used. Different drug combinations, or *protocols*, are available and range in cost, effectiveness, frequency of visits and side effects. As oncologists, we will help you decide which protocol is the best start for your cat. The longest success is generally seen with a combination of six different medications. Each drug has its individual method of damaging the cancer cells, which results in the longest period of remission and thus longest life expectancy. The drugs are used in rotation in order to limit side effects. *Induction* is the more intense 6 to 7-week period when treatments are given weekly and we closely monitor the patient's response to therapy. After the disease is under control, *maintenance* treatments continue to keep the disease in remission for as long as possible.

PROGNOSIS

With chemotherapy, most cats will reach a complete remission and enjoy happy, healthy lives of six months or longer- often much longer! The effectiveness of treatment depends on how advanced the disease is and whether your cat has other health problems. We are still learning about the factors that result in a wide range of life expectancy. As individuals, each of our patients will have a slightly different response and outcome. Our goal is to maintain the best quality of life possible!

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