

My Dog Has Cancer! Now, What Do I Do?

Dr. Al Townshend

- **Sit Down and take a deep breath**

Cancer is the last thing a Guardian wants to hear from their veterinarian. It is an all too common diagnosis that, in the past, has been considered a death sentence for their beloved pet.

Today, the light is brighter, and there is a future for many pets that have cancer.

When it comes to cancer, dogs and humans are very similar. As a result, much of what we know about cancer in humans apply to dogs. That has opened the door to new treatment possibilities that go far beyond what was available just a few years ago. Treatment options are changing daily, thanks to dedicated human and animal researchers.

- **Stress**

From the moment a Guardian learns their cherished pet has cancer, it is vital for the pet and the Guardian family not to let the emotional stress take control.

When humans are emotionally upset, and in distress, the brain tends to narrow the focus and make it difficult to concentrate. Taking the time to get emotions under control before moving forward is time well spent for both the Guardian and the pet.

The famous story-teller, Will Rogers, once said: “dogs were put on earth to please man and they spend 24 hours a day doing just that”. Pets focus on our emotional state, and so, if we are happy, they are happy too. Staying positive and upbeat, even during emotionally stressful times, is essential in maintaining the pet’s health as well as the Guardian’s wellbeing.

- **Get as much information as possible**

It is important to get all of your questions answered, so be sure and make a list. Start with your family veterinarian, and if possible, seek consultation with a veterinary cancer specialist.

- There are many types of cancer, and there are multiple stages for each type of cancer. Getting a referral from your family veterinarian to a veterinary oncologist (cancer specialist) is essential to thoroughly understand the condition in your pet and the options available.

- There are a number of supportive measures that can be taken at home to enhance the outcome and maintain quality of life for the pet.

 - Diets that support the pet and discourage cancer.

 - Natural antioxidants that reduce oxidative stress

 - Supplements that boost the immune system

Seek out a holistic veterinarian to get information on alternative therapies and natural support.

Assembling as much information as possible is essential to understanding the options and the commitment necessary. It also helps to better understand what to expect.

- **Be Positive**

Making the decision that cancer is not going to win and committing to a positive attitude is essential for both the Guardians and the pet.

- **The Family**

Once the primary family members have all the information necessary, it is essential to share the information with all of the family members. Younger children often need extra time and understanding.

Decisions are best made by everyone, and at the same time, commitments are also best made by everyone.

- **Treatment is a commitment of time and money**

When it comes to cancer, there are just three basic options, depending on the circumstances of each pet. Gathering as much information as possible helps in making the best choice for the pet and the Guardian.

Treatment

Catching cancer early offers the best outcome for treatment. Being observant, recognizing subtle physical changes, and deviations in the routine can raise an alarm that should be investigated.

Traditional treatment options include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and even combinations of these three options. Today, current research suggests that Immunotherapy and even vaccines can offer additional possibilities for the treatment of pets. Also, alternative therapies, diet regimens specifically for cancer patients, and supplementation can be beneficial. Emotional support and regular exercise are also an integral part of any treatment regimen.

Treatment requires the family to commit a significant amount of time. There will be numerous trips to the veterinary hospital before, during, and after treatment. Both chemotherapy and radiation require multiple day trips for treatment. There are also follow-up visits, and there can be complications that require additional visits to the veterinarian.

Cancer therapies can also require a significant financial commitment. Surgeries can be complicated, newer medications are often expensive, and radiation therapies require very expensive equipment.

(more below)

Maintaining a good quality of life for as long as possible

There are times when treatment may not be the best option. Some pets appear almost normal despite being diagnosed in the last stages of cancer. The best choice for these pets may be maintaining their joy for life for as long as possible.

Pets get great joy in their social interaction with family and friends (both human and four-legged), eating and drinking, exercise, and play. Appearing happy and mentally positive are all signs the pet is still enjoying life. Doing everything possible to maintain a high quality of life, full of joy, for as long as possible can be extremely rewarding for both the pet and the Guardians.

As time passes, maintaining an acceptable quality of life may become more complicated, and eventually, tougher decisions may need to be made for the pet.

Euthanasia

Unfortunately, cancer is one of those conditions that never goes completely away for many pets. Eventually, despite all the effort, quality of life becomes the issue.

Once the joy goes out of the eyes and there is no pleasure, we have to make the decision to let our pet go, in order to do what's best for the pet.

It is essential to have a plan in place, so everyone understands it is time, and everyone has an opportunity to say their good-byes. Making sure your veterinarian has an understanding of your wishes so the passing can be peaceful.

- **The Pet**

Our pets don't think about the past or the future: they live in the moment. They don't hold grudges, and they always forgive. They live life as it comes, and so they depend on their Guardians to make the best decisions in their daily lives. To keep them safe and make sure they are loved from the first day to the last day of their life.