

GASTROINTESTINAL LYMPHOSARCOMA

About Lymphosarcoma

Alimentary lymphosarcoma is a common malignant cancer affecting the lymphnodes in the abdomen and the walls of the stomach and intestine. Though this type of cancer is most common in older cats that are often negative for feline leukemia, it can also show up in young cats, dogs, and ferrets. The cancer usually originates in the lymph nodes located in the mesentery (next to the intestines), or in the aggregates of lymphoid cells within the walls of the intestines. The cancer will present as either a diffuse thickening of the walls of the intestines or as large masses being the cancerous lymph nodes found within the abdominal cavity (belly) or intestinal wall masses. If left untreated, eventually the patient becomes debilitated as the cancer spreads losing weight and developing diarrhea and vomiting, and when the masses grow very large, they can rupture leading quickly to peritonitis and death. If caught early enough, small masses can be removed surgically, and the patient can be treated with chemotherapy with good success for remission.

Symptoms

- Rapid weight loss
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Lethargy
- Anorexia (loss of appetite)

Diagnosis

- **Lymphosarcoma** can be confirmed only with a biopsy specimen- where a piece of the tumor is collected and then examined under the microscope by a veterinary pathologist. Occasionally, a diagnosis can be made by looking at cells that have been aspirated or extracted from the mass using a long needle introduced through the skin into the suspected mass. However, in some cases, the clinical signs are so consistent with lymphoma, many owners elect not to confirm lymphoma through these methods.
- **Physical exam**-the veterinarian can often palpate or feel abdominal masses or intestinal thickening in cats and ferrets, but dogs are much more difficult to feel.
- **Blood work** is generally normal although elevations in liver and kidney enzymes can be elevated if the lymphoma has spread to those organs.
- **Radiographs (x-rays)** can show thickening of the intestinal loops and/or a discrete mass, however, in some cases, the radiographs can look normal.
- **Ultrasound exam of the abdomen** is the most accurate diagnostic method second only to biopsy for diagnosing lymphosarcoma. Ultrasound images clearly show the presence of thickened intestinal loops, masses, and/or enlarged cancerous lymph nodes. Ultrasound is also very useful in guiding needle aspirates and needle biopsy collections.

Treatment- Chemotherapy +/- surgery

Lymphosarcoma has been successfully treated using chemotherapy or a combination of surgery to remove large masses followed by chemotherapy. Surgery is indicated for large solitary masses that are at risk for obstructing the intestine or rupturing. Remission rates with chemotherapy can be approximately 75 % and most patients stay in remission for anywhere from 7 – 14 months. Without treatment, survival is often less than 6 weeks. There are several chemotherapeutic protocols being used, usually a combination of oral prednisone given daily at home in combination with weekly injections of anti-cancer drugs given IV (in the vein) by the veterinarian. Animals generally tolerate the drugs well, although some animals may become ill requiring hospitalization. Consultation is always advised with a boarded veterinary oncologist, and more specific prognosis can be given for individual pets.

Prognosis

Highly variable depending on the stage the lymphoma is detected, the organs affected, and the intensity of the treatment pursued. A veterinary oncologist should be consulted to give a prognosis for each individual patient whose owners wish to pursue treatment.