



Canine Mammary Tumors

Introduction: Mammary gland tumors are common in dogs that are not spayed or that are spayed later in life. In dogs, early spaying provides a strong protective effect; dogs spayed before their first heat cycle are much less likely to develop a mammary gland tumor than dogs spayed after their third heat cycle. Treatment with megestrol acetate is also linked to the development of mammary tumors in animals.

Clinical Signs: Mammary tumors are similar to breast tumors in people. Usually no symptoms occur other than finding a “lump” when petting your dog. Uncommonly, mammary tumors can bleed or even become infected. Because some of these tumors are malignant, they can spread to other parts of the body and cause illness, loss of appetite, weight loss, trouble breathing and lethargy.

Diagnosis: The diagnosis of a mammary tumor relies primarily on evaluation of a biopsy. A safe rule of thumb regarding mammary gland tumors is that about 50% of these tumors are benign and 50% are malignant. Further, 50% of the malignant tumors in dogs can be cured with just surgery. Typically, the smaller the tumor is at the time of diagnosis, the better the outcome. Further tests can be done to evaluate for metastasis (spread of cancer) and help determine your pet’s prognosis. These tests included x-rays of the thorax, abdominal ultrasound, fine needle aspirates of the mammary lymph nodes that drain the site of the tumor and bloodwork to assess the overall health of your pet.

Treatment: All dogs with benign mammary tumors can be cured with surgery. As mentioned above, 50% of dogs with malignant mammary gland tumors can be cured with surgical removal of the mass. However, even if the tumor is completely removed with surgery, your dog may develop another mammary tumor in the future. For the 50% of dogs with malignant tumors that cannot be cured with surgery, chemotherapy or radiation therapy may also be offered. These treatment options would be done at a referral center that specializes in veterinary oncology. If you are interested in pursuing chemotherapy or radiation, we will gladly refer you to the oncologist at Blue Pearl Veterinary Partners here in Brentwood, TN.

Prognosis: Your pet’s prognosis depends entirely on the malignancy of the mammary tumor and the amount of metastasis present at the time of diagnosis. With malignant tumors, it is nearly impossible to say how fast the disease will progress and spread without treatment.