



10 Steps To Take When Your Pet Has Cancer

Facing a cancer diagnosis of a loved one is difficult on many levels. When your companion animal has been diagnosed with cancer, it is easy to feel helpless. There are steps that you can take to educate yourself and care for your animal with cancer. The following ten steps will ease your stress and help you understand what to do when you hear the words: "Your pet has cancer."

1. Recognize that Cancer in Pets is Common

The fact that your pet developed cancer is not unusual. As your pet ages, its immune system weakens and cancer becomes a higher risk, just like in humans. You and your pet are not alone during these difficult times.

According to the Veterinary Cancer Society, cancer is the main cause of death in 47% of dogs (especially dogs over age ten) and 32% of cats. Dogs get cancer at about the same rate as humans, while cats have fewer cancers. There are over 100 types of cancers in dogs. Mast cell tumors are the most common in dogs. The most common cancers in cats are leukemia and lymphoma. Most times cancer is found in aging animals, but some breeds have higher rates of cancer than others.

It may be helpful to join and attend a support group of other pet owners coping with their sick animals. This can help to counter some of your fear, isolation, and worry. Listed below are a few online groups, but also check with your veterinarian to see if there are any local, in-person groups. Please be aware that these online groups are typically managed by other pet owners, not necessarily mental health practitioners. If you feel you need more psychological support, consider connecting with a licensed therapist. Your veterinarian should be able to provide resources for grief support in your local area. Other online resources include:

- [Pets With Cancer Forum](#)

2. Learn About Your Pet's Cancer

Your pet has been diagnosed with cancer. Cancer is a disease that results from the uncontrolled growth of cells in the body. Cancers are often named for the type of cell that is growing out of control. The terms *cancer*, *malignancy*, and *neoplasia* may be used interchangeably – they are just different ways to say cancer.

There are many types of cancer and each behaves differently. Some forms of cancer have the ability to spread to other sites in the body, which may be far from the original site. This occurs because these cancer cells can enter the blood or lymph vessels and be carried to other organs. When the cancer has spread to other areas of the body, it is called metastasis.

As for any diagnosis, in a pet or a person, educate yourself on the options, costs involved, and the pros and cons of treating your pet.

3. Understand Your Pet's Treatment Options

There are several types of therapies used to treat cancer in companion animals. These include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and immunotherapy. For some cancers, treatment will consist of a single type of therapy, while others may require combination therapy (2 or more different therapies).

In an effort to test newer (and hopefully more effective) forms of therapy, you may be asked to enroll your pet in a clinical trial. The purpose of these trials is to learn more about the specific type of treatment (that may be of value to humans and other pets with cancer), as well as hopefully provide a benefit to your pet.

4. Find a Veterinary Oncologist

When your pet is diagnosed with cancer, you may be uncertain about the choices presented to you. Just as we do in human medicine, get a second opinion from a board-certified veterinary oncologist. This may confirm a chosen course of treatment or open up new options for your pet.

The Veterinary Cancer Society has a helpful website, offering resources for pet owners, including a "Find a specialist in your area". www.vetcancersociety.org

The American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine has a website with a section for pet owners. www.acvim.org

5. Educate Yourself on Terminology

The veterinary oncologist will tell you what your pet's body is going through. [Understanding veterinary medical terms](#) will help you better understand what the veterinary oncologist is suggesting for your pet. Do a little reading before your visit to become more familiar with some of the terms used. Bring a notebook along to your veterinary oncology visit so that you can take notes about treatment options and next steps. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

6. Understand How Veterinarians Test Tumors

To gather information to help determine the extent of the cancer, your veterinarian may order several tests. These can include blood tests (e.g., blood count, chemistry profile), urinalysis, radiographs (X-rays, ultrasound), tissue aspirate, and biopsy. Tests done by your local veterinarian might be repeated at a cancer specialty center due to the changing nature of your pet's illness.

Other tests that may be used include ultrasound, specialized radiologic studies (e.g. nuclear scan, CT or MRI scan, dye contrast studies), bone marrow aspirate, lymph node aspirate, endoscopy (direct examination of the stomach, colon, or lung with a specialized scope & camera), and immunologic studies.

Once this testing has been completed, your veterinarian will be better able to discuss treatment options for your pet. The goal of therapy will also be discussed. Tumors that have metastasized (spread to other areas) extensively are usually not curable. Therefore, the goal of therapy for these animals is palliation (relieving symptoms and possibly prolonging life, without providing a cure). Localized tumors that do not invade surrounding tissues have the best chance of being cured.

7. Think about Your Pet's Quality of Life

Cancer treatment for animals focuses on alleviating pain and suffering, along with extending life, as long as the [quality of that life](#) can be preserved. Treatment is typically much less aggressive than in humans.

What makes your pet's day? Is it a swim in the local pond, sunbathing on the front porch, a long walk in the woods, or just snuggling up with you? When your animal cannot enjoy these activities, or they cause more discomfort, their quality of life is compromised. Sometimes your veterinarian can offer symptom management to alleviate pain and suffering, and sometimes, when quality of life is impacted, we need to think about euthanasia.

8. Understand the Financial Impact of Your Pet's Cancer

Medical care for pets can be costly. If you have pet insurance, now is the time to use it! If not, [CareCredit](#) is a financing option available for veterinary care, but the veterinarian providing care must be a registered provider with CareCredit. Ask your vet's office if they accept CareCredit. CareCredit can help you pay for out-of-pocket expenses for your pet's care at fixed interest rates with more flexibility for repayment than traditional credit cards. But be sure to read the fine print and think about the long-term debt you could be incurring. You may also want to think about [crowdfunding/fundraising](#) through websites like GoFundMe. Finally, some pet support organizations may be very useful when you are unable to afford the vet bill.

[Best Friends Animal Society](#) has a helpful list of organizations and options for financial assistance.

9. Keep a normal routine

Fun activities like exercising, walks, and playtime will help to maintain a healthy mindset for both you and your pet. Our pets like routine. It helps them stay active and engaged, especially if they will have to make many visits to the vet for treatment.

10. Be hopeful and realistic.

Our pets need us, and we need them. Although some animals may experience transient discomfort from therapy, treatment of most pets with cancer can be accomplished without major distress or taking away from your pet's enjoyment of life. Just because an animal has been diagnosed with cancer does not mean its life is immediately over. Your commitment to your pet and your veterinarians' dedication to providing state-of-the-art care will work together to keep your pet as happy as possible.

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