

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



CANCER IN YOUR CAT



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Cancer is a potentially dangerous growth that can affect any part of the body. As many as one in six cats are likely to develop one of the many different forms of cancer at some stage of their lives. The risk increases with age and so with cats now enjoying a longer life expectancy, the number of animals with cancer has been increasing in recent years.



What causes cancer?

As with human cancers, the causes of cancer in cats are still not well understood. Some toxins or infections may increase the risk of developing some kinds of cancer but in most cases there is no obvious reason why a cat develops cancer. Several virus infections of cats – FeLV and FIV – do increase the likelihood of cancer. Spaying a female cat reduces her chances of developing mammary (breast) cancer.

How do I know if my cat has cancer?

Cancer can have many different symptoms. It is not possible to tell whether a sick pet is suffering from cancer without consulting a vet. Lumps and bumps that are visible on the outside are not necessarily cancers – but a vet should check them. Cancer can occur in any animal and at any age. Unfortunately sometimes even young cats can develop cancer.

Can cancer be treated?

In many cases, yes. It depends on the part of the body affected and whether the tumour is malignant, i.e. cancerous, (which is likely to spread to other parts of the body) or benign (which will not spread). Unfortunately in cats some types of tumour are associated with FeLV and FIV virus infections, and because of this they are often widespread within the body at the time of diagnosis. Even if blood tests are negative for these viruses, they are not 100 per cent reliable – false results do occur. Your vet can advise you as to whether a cancer is likely to be associated with virus infection.

If your pet is diagnosed with cancer the most important thing is for it to continue to enjoy life to the full. Where a cancer cannot be completely cured, treatment can often maintain a good quality of life. Unfortunately, some treatments are very expensive. Your vet will discuss with you the options and will provide guidance on how to recognise if your pet is in pain. Most vets will encourage you to opt for euthanasia if they feel that your pet is in too much pain to attempt treatment.

There are three basic methods of treatment. Not all cancers are sensitive to all types of treatment and they are sometimes used together. Your vet will advise on the best treatment.

Surgical removal

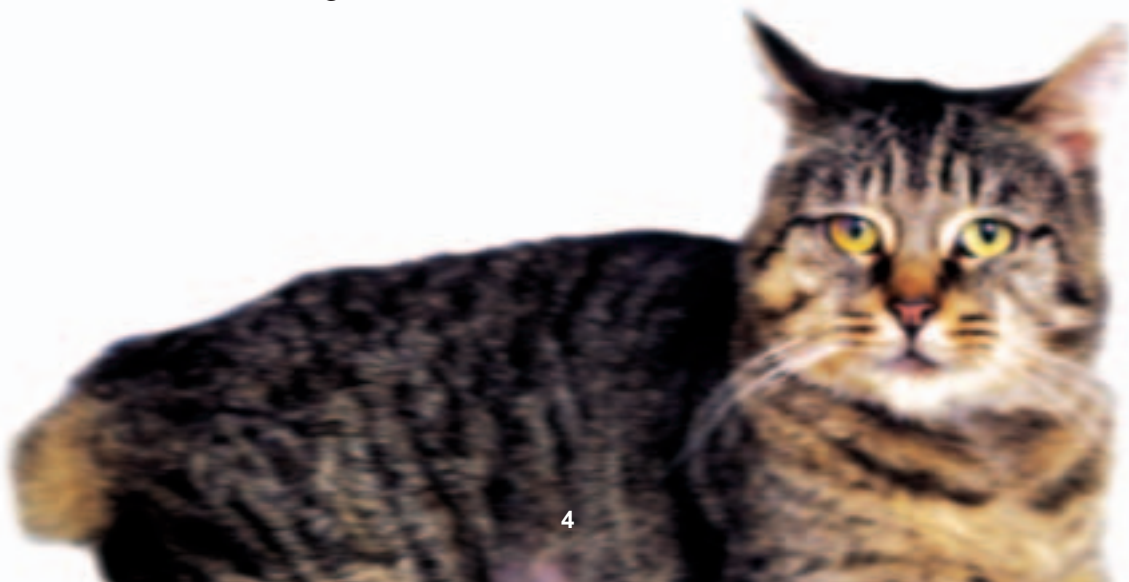
This is usually the best choice for growths affecting the skin, or for internal tumours which appear to be forming distinct lumps. It is sometimes possible to predict prior to surgery whether a lump is benign or malignant, but to find that out for certain the tissue removed at surgery needs to be sent to a laboratory. For any cancer whose size is making your pet unwell, surgery may produce an improvement in condition. However, if it is not completely removed there is a risk that it will come back in the same or a different place. A particular problem in cats is that many growths in organs such as the bowel or liver may actually be due to a cancer of the white blood cells (a lymphoma). Such cancers are likely to be widespread at the time of diagnosis and surgery is not an appropriate treatment.

Chemotherapy (drug treatment)

Veterinary chemotherapy is designed so that the unpleasant side effects seen in people are greatly reduced. The majority of animals remain well and happy throughout treatment. Sadly, chemotherapy in animals does not usually provide a permanent cure but it can be effective in delaying illness from cancer for many months. It may be used alone or with surgery to prevent or delay the reappearance of cancer.

Radiotherapy (X-rays)

Radiotherapy units are only located in a few specialised centres and your vet would need to refer your cat to a cancer specialist for this form of treatment. The radiation may be given from an outside source or radioactive material may be injected into the body. A beam of radiation is most effective on cancers of the limbs and head where it is less likely to damage normal tissue before reaching the cancer.



Will my cat be in pain?

It is a top priority for vets to keep animals pain free and enjoying a normal life. Modern painkillers are highly effective but there will come a point (unless a tumour can be completely removed at surgery) when your cat starts to feel pain and its quality of life is reduced. At this point, your vet will usually suggest euthanasia. If you feel that your pet is not enjoying life, you should talk to your vet. Conversely, you do not need to be afraid that your vet will insist on euthanasia for an animal that is enjoying its normal day-to-day routine.

How long will my cat live?

This is the question that every owner wants answered but, as with human cancer, it is impossible for your vet to give you an answer with any confidence. The survival chances will depend not only on the type and stage of the disease but also on your cat's general state of health. You should discuss this issue with your vet so that you can agree between you an appropriate treatment plan for your cat. Talking it over with your vet is the very best way to obtain reassurance and an independent assessment that you are doing what is right for your pet.



Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



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