



Lymphoma in Dogs Fact Sheet

Lymphoma in dogs is primarily a cancerous condition of the lymph glands.

It can also affect other organs such as the liver and spleen and occasionally we see forms of lymphoma in dogs apparently only affecting a single site such as the skin. As a general rule lymphoma affects anatomically distinct sites throughout the body. Therefore treatment must likewise treat the whole body.

What is Lymphoma in dogs?

Lymphoma is a cancer of the lymphocytes, or white blood cells. There are multiple different types of lymphoma in dogs, just as there are in humans, though at the moment this is really a concept that is only just reaching the wider veterinary consciousness. The different types of lymphoma arise from malignant transformation of different types of lymphocytes or as a consequence of different specific DNA aberrations acquired during the life of the individual patient. Most lymphoma types respond favourably to the administration of chemotherapy. There are some that do not and it is important to attempt to identify these cases as other treatments may be indicated.

The life expectancy with most types of lymphoma in dogs is limited to only a few months. With chemotherapy protocols, this is increased to an average of 6½ to 12 months depending on the treatment plan.



Evaluation

A diagnosis of lymphoma in dogs is usually made on examination of a pathological specimen. This might be a fine needle aspirate biopsy of an enlarged lymph node or other structure or it may be a histopathological examination of a bigger biopsy specimen. At the current time, most diagnostic evaluations stop once the diagnosis of lymphoma has been made. As alluded to above, this is not always ideal. Further evaluations can be performed including immunocytochemistry and cytomorphological and histomorphological assessments. Classification of canine lymphoma into the different subtypes will allow us to provide more specific treatment and to provide more precise estimates of prognosis.

At the moment only a few of the more common subtypes have been fully characterised; as time passes and more experience is gained this will improve. Some alternative, novel therapies are likely to arise for the less common disease presentations and improved outcomes will be seen in the more common subtypes.

Other evaluations are important to understand the general health of the patient before decisions about chemotherapy are taken. These include blood tests and possibly x-rays and ultrasound evaluations. Some types of lymphoma are associated with high blood calcium concentrations, hypercalcaemia. It is important for the well-being of the patient that complications like this are identified and managed appropriately.

Treatment Options

There are countless chemotherapy treatment plans (or protocols) that have been described for the management of canine lymphoma. The principal candidates are described as multidrug chemotherapy protocols. They incorporate the three drugs Cyclophosphamide, Vincristine (Oncovin) and Prednisolone, usually called the COP protocol, or the same three plus a drug called doxorubicin (Hydroxydaunorubicin) usually called the CHOP protocol. The COP protocols have a reduced chance of inducing unwanted side effects but carry a reduced probability of inducing a complete remission. The average life expectancy on this treatment to lymphoma in dogs is approximately 6½ months. The CHOP protocols achieve complete

remission in a higher percentage of cases and the average life expectancy is improved as a consequence to approximately 11½ months but the risk of unwanted side effects is that little bit greater.

The decision about which treatment plan to choose should be made in conjunction with your veterinary surgeon, whether they are your local vet or your oncology specialist. This is not a one-size-fits-all situation. Some veterinary practices will very sensibly only offer a single lymphoma protocol. The rationale here is that they see a reduced number of cases compared to a veterinary oncologist; therefore it is important for optimal familiarity with the disease in question and the possible range of manifestations of tumour and treatment response that every member of staff in the practice is used to using the same treatment plan, otherwise things start to get very confusing and chemotherapy is not a thing to be confused with. Other factors influence treatment choice such as accessibility of a specialist centre, cost of therapy, duration of therapy and of course the patient's own response to the drugs once they have been administered.

Chemotherapy induced side effects are usually minor if indeed they are noted at all. Nevertheless it is critical that the risk of these effects is addressed and discussed openly prior to the onset of therapy. In many cases the improvement in the patient's condition substantially outweighs the minor impact of the treatment related side effects leading to an overall improvement in general health despite chemotherapy.

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Quality of Life

It is tremendously important to emphasise that patients undergoing chemotherapy (or any other cancer therapy for that matter) do so because their team of carers, the primary veterinary surgeon, the veterinary oncologist and the family at home, all feel that the treatment is improving quality of life at all times. Chemotherapy and cancer rightly carry a certain stigma. We take great pains to ensure that any potential side effects are discussed fully prior to embarking on a course of cancer therapy. This way our owners make informed decisions about the treatment choices they have for their pets. The aim of our cancer therapy is to promote a good quality of life first and foremost and life expectancy second.

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