LUMPS & BUMPS ON YOUR PET

Many people find a lump on their dog or cat and immediately fear the worse. Their pet has cancer. While this is possible, finding a lump on your pet is many steps away from a terrible diagnosis. First you need to schedule a veterinary consultation.

When a pet comes to me with a mass or lump I start with gathering a history before the physical examination. How long has the mass been present? Is it itchy, painful or hot? Was there any local trauma to the pet? Masses may be anything including; bruises under the fur, ingrown hairs, inflammation, or an abscess. Enlarged lymph nodes near the mass may be important. Treatment options may include surgery, so we need to assess the whole patient to decide if he or she is healthy enough to undergo a general anesthesia. I always measure masses throughout my treatments starting at the initial examination. If I suspect the mass is actually an infection, I may start the pet on antibiotics while I wait for test results to see if there is a significant response to treatment.

After I have examined the pet my diagnosis may be relatively simple. Small meibomian gland tumors on the edge of the eyelid and papillomas or wart-like growths on the skin are usually easy to diagnose. Treatment may hinge only on whether the location or size of the mass is causing the pet any discomfort and we may elect to do nothing. Some old dogs get wart-like papillomas the way old ladies like me get age spots. Most lumps are not that easy to diagnose and a veterinarian will often recommend a fine-needle aspirate. This is the simple collection of cells from the mass during an office visit. The cells are then submitted to a laboratory for a pathologist to assess.

Often the pathologist will give the veterinarian a specific or general diagnosis of the composition and makeup of the mass. If the mass is benign, such as a lipoma, the decision may be to simply monitor its growth. If the mass is cancerous the pathologist may be able to tell if it is the type of cancer where simple surgical removal is curative. In some cases it may not be possible to completely remove the lump, then debulking surgery to make the mass smaller may be recommended for the pet's comfort and quality of life. Or the mass may be nasty malignant cancer with metastasis elsewhere in the body possible. Information from the pathologist guides the veterinarian to present appropriate treatment plans to the pet's owners. At some stage blood tests, urinalysis and chest radiographs of the patient may be necessary for the best plan of attack to be selected.

Fine needle aspirates of masses are most often followed up with a pathologist looking at the whole mass or a chunk of the mass to make more precise recommendations for treatment and to check if all the cancerous tissue is removed. If the mass does turn out to be an aggressive form of cancer your veterinarian will often recommend referral to a veterinarian oncologist or cancer specialist.

Finding a lump and scheduling a visit with your veterinarian may give you reassurance all is well, or it may lead down a long terrifying path with a much loved pet. The sophistication of cancer treatments in pets rivals that available in human medicine and is continuously evolving. Fortunately, the vast majority of the lumps and bumps we see on pets have very positive outcomes.

Jennifer L. Scott, D.V.M.