

# Hemangiosarcoma (HSA) in Dogs

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

## Signs & Symptoms

### Initial Symptoms

- Inability to exercise or play; unexplained lameness
- Unable to get comfortable
- Mild to severe weight loss
- Inappetence and nausea
- Occasional vomiting or diarrhea
- Pacing, especially at night

### Intermediate Symptoms

- Pale gums, unexplained bruising
- Reclusive, quiet behavior
- Distended abdomen
- Coughing or panting for no apparent reason
- Black tarry stools

### Advanced Symptoms

- Difficulty rising and moving
- Blue colored gums/tongue
- Increased sleeping
- Dull mentation
- Needy behavior
- Crying, whining
- Shaking, trembling
- Persistent anorexia or signs of nausea

### Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Difficulty breathing
- Sudden collapse
- Seizures
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Crying in pain
- Internal or external bleeding

## What Is It?

Hemangiosarcoma (HSA) is an aggressive, malignant cancer of the cells that line blood vessels most commonly presents as a mass on the spleen, but may also appear on the liver and heart. Middle-aged to older dogs are typically affected. Certain breeds such as Labradors, Golden Retrievers and German Shepherds have been documented to have higher incidents of HSA. Because HSA causes abnormal blood vessel development, sudden and sometimes sporadic bleeding is common in affected pets. Though extremely rare, cats can also suffer from HSA.

## Diagnosis

Due to the slow growing nature of HSA, and the lack of specific or severe symptoms, early detection can prove very difficult. If the cancer has grown large enough at one specific site such as the spleen, the tumor may be detected by your veterinarian upon examination and palpation of the abdomen. Detection of cancer and subsequently confirmed diagnosis of HSA can occur with the help of x-rays, an abdominal and/or chest ultrasound, testing of fluid in the abdomen and/or chest, and biopsy of the mass through surgery. Unfortunately, in the majority of pets, by the time the cancer is diagnosed regardless of the location, size, and symptoms or lack of symptoms, it has already spread on a cellular level to other areas of the body. Because cancer utilizes blood vessels, metastatic spread to other areas can happen rapidly even if the symptoms have not yet started. Many times, a dog with HSA will have months of waxing and waning unexplained weakness, inappetence, and depression. Most commonly a pet is brought to their veterinarian for sudden collapse due to internal bleeding from the mass which can clot or continue to bleed.

## Treatment and Management

Unfortunately, while there are treatment options available, there is no cure. Surgery may be an effective, necessary option to remove the primary tumor in order to temporarily stop bleeding and stabilize the pet for the time being. However, it is important to understand that surgery cannot remove all of the cancer or stop the spread of cancer. Chemotherapy is often used in conjunction with surgery to help combat the spread of the microscopic cancer cells; however, it does not cure or stop the progression indefinitely. Consultation with a veterinary oncologist remains the best way to learn about palliative chemotherapy and radiation options. Providing multimodal pain control, even if a pet is not displaying obvious symptoms, should always be discussed. Opioid and neuropathic pain medications can help provide relief. Proper nutrition and grooming will help provide a healthier, happier pet. In addition, a Chinese herbal medicine called Yunnan baiyao is becoming more popular in palliative care for canine hemangiosarcoma for its attribute to clot small bleeds.

## Prognosis

The prognosis for HSA is extremely guarded. Surgery alone to remove the primary tumor carries an average survival time of 1-4 months, while chemotherapy in addition to surgery carries an average survival time of 6-8 months. However, even with chemotherapy, the survival time may be no more than 1-3 months. Typically, pets that have undergone surgery to remove the bleeding tumor, despite having metastatic disease, can live comfortably for 1-3 months



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at home. Inevitably the spread of cancer to other areas such as the lungs, heart, and liver will result in the often fast onset of symptoms after which euthanasia is the most humane option. A personalized treatment plan is important. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the best treatment protocol for you and your pet.

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## *Management Tips*

### *Consider providing:*

- Easily accessible food and water dishes
- Ramps/stairs to common areas
- Access to "safe," quiet areas
- Warm, soft sleeping areas
- Modified surfaces to increase traction
- Creative stimulation that does not require strenuous activity

### *Try to:*

- Be consistent with medications
- Limit strenuous activity/rough play
- Limit stress (kids, people, noise)
- Track your pet's quality of life and symptoms with a calendar
- Track weight, appetite, urination, defecation, energy, etc.
- Manage weight with diets
- Provide preventative care such as heartworm prevention

Before your dog's condition becomes unmanageable it is important to begin palliative care discussions with your veterinarian. Normal functions such as eating, drinking, urinating, and defecating do NOT mean your pet is not in pain. Discuss providing palliative medications for pain regardless of "normal" body functions.