

Lymphoma in Dogs

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

Signs & Symptoms

Initial Symptoms

- Clingy behavior
- Reclusive behavior
- Excessive Panting
- Coughing
- Unthrifty coat

Intermediate Symptoms

- Inability to play
- Difficulty getting comfortable
- Mild to severe weight loss
- Inappetence and nausea
- Vomiting and diarrhea

Advanced Symptoms

- Difficulty rising/moving
- Increased sleeping
- Irritability
- Difficulty breathing
- Shaking, whining

Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Difficulty breathing
- Unable to walk
- Blue gums and/or tongue
- Sudden collapse
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Crying, whining in pain

What Is It?

Canine lymphomas, also termed lymphosarcomas, represent a group of the most commonly diagnosed cancers that form from white blood cells called lymphocytes. Lymphomas account for approximately 7-14% of all cancer diagnoses with the average dog affected between the age of 5-10 years old. The behaviors of the varied types of lymphoma can range from slow growing to aggressive and life-threatening. The most common forms of canine lymphoma, termed "multicentric" due to its behavior in the body, originate within lymph nodes and spread to other organs such as the spleen, liver and bone. Lymphoma also commonly originates in organs of the immune system such as the spleen and bone marrow. Other canine lymphomas include skin, stomach, intestines, and organs of the chest such as the thymus gland. The type of symptoms that develop depend somewhat on the type of lymphoma present. Your dog may experience weight loss, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and lethargy with gastrointestinal and stomach lymphoma. Skin lymphoma generally presents as what appears to be a skin infection that does not heal. Lymphomas within the chest cavity can cause fluid accumulation around the lungs leading to difficulty breathing. The cause of lymphoma is unknown but research is underway.

Diagnosis

Generalized or isolated lymph node enlargement among superficial areas of the body, such as the armpit and groin, is the most common symptom of dogs presenting to the veterinary office. Initial symptoms may be mild and non-specific such as lethargy, inappetence, weight loss, depression, and increased thirst and urination. The diagnosis of lymphoma may be supported if elevated calcium is present. Lymphomas are categorized into stages of increasing disease severity and progression of symptoms. More specific symptoms are then determined by the type of lymphoma diagnosed. A lymph node biopsy generally is the preferred method for definitive diagnosis. These samples are often used for further testing to classify the type of lymphoma present (such as B cell versus T cell) to more precisely predict behavior, prognosis, and advise treatment. Other diagnostics used for staging include blood tests (20% of dogs have elevated calcium), urinalysis, chest x-rays, abdominal ultrasound with organ aspirates, CT, MRI, and bone marrow tests.

Treatment and Management

Multi-drug and single drug intravenous chemotherapy, typically administered in rounds of multiple weeks, are currently the most effective treatments for canine lymphoma. Fortunately, dogs tolerate the side effects of chemotherapy better than humans with milder manageable side effects. Surgery with radiation therapy can provide benefit for some canine lymphoma patients. Alternative therapies such as herbal, nutritional, and supplemental are available, but must be given safely. Steroids alone with symptomatic management is commonly chosen as many owners elect to not pursue extensive diagnostics and treatments. With any type or stage of lymphoma, comprehensive and multi-modal pain management is necessary.

Prognosis

Lymphoma is not generally considered a curable disease. The prognosis with chemotherapy is favorable. As high as 90% of patients may experience partial to complete remission(s) that may provide an average of a year of survival time

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in up to 50% of patients. Steroids alone may not extend survival time beyond the average reported two months, however, quality of life tends to be good. Broadly, diagnosis of T cell lymphoma, older pets, and those with other diseases and/or illness upon diagnosis have a more guarded prognosis. Treatment and prognosis depend heavily on the type and stage of lymphoma, as well as the general health and concurrent disease status of the pet. A personalized treatment plan is important. Talk to your veterinarian and a veterinary oncologist regarding the best treatment protocol for your dog.

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Management Tips

Consider providing:

- Easily accessible food and water
- Ramps/stairs to common areas
- Access to safe, quiet areas
- Modifying slippery surfaces to increase traction and ensure adequate lighting
- Warm, soft sleeping areas
- Creative stimulation that does not require strenuous activity
- Compounded medications in easy to deliver and/or tasty forms

Try to:

- Be consistent with medications
- Track your dog's appetite, bowel movements, breathing, etc.
- Track your dog's weight
- Limit stress (kids, noise)
- Manage weight with diets
- Consult with an oncologist
- Manage pain proactively
- Address concerns quickly
- Use low or no salt broth to flavor foods and encourage appetite
- Have a supply of meds for symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhea
- Avoid therapy with steroids until AFTER a diagnosis is made as to not falsely obscure the results

Before your pet's condition becomes unmanageable or they are losing quality of life, it is important to begin end-of-life care discussions. Learn about pet hospice care and/or euthanasia services in your area so you are prepared.