

# Lymphoma in Cats

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

## Signs & Symptoms

### Initial Symptoms

- Clingy behavior
- Reclusive behavior
- Coughing
- Unthrifty coat/poor grooming
- Vomiting and diarrhea
- Decreased appetite

### Intermediate Symptoms

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

### Advanced Symptoms

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

### 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?

Feline lymphomas, also termed lymphosarcomas, represent the most commonly diagnosed type of malignant feline cancer and form from white blood cells, called lymphocytes. The lymph system is a collection of components within the body, such as the thymus gland, spleen, and bone marrow, that work to protect the body from harmful substances. The lymph system is responsible for providing needed lymph fluid to areas of the cat's body via a network of lymph vessels, that ultimately connect to the lymph nodes. These lymph nodes are found deep within the body and in superficial areas such as the neck, groin, armpit, and behind the knee. The lymph fluid transported through this duct network has such functions as absorbing fat from the gastrointestinal system, collecting and removing infectious agents and waste from the body, and providing oxygen and nutrients to the cells of the body. The three general presentations include: multicentric lymphoma affecting superficial and deep lymph nodes, mediastinal lymphoma found within the chest, and alimentary lymphoma that affects the gastrointestinal tract. Gastrointestinal lymphoma is most common. Mediastinal and multicentric lymphomas are closely linked to the feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). As these infectious diseases have decreased in prevalence, so have those types of lymphoma as well. These forms are seen more commonly among unvaccinated outdoor cats due to the high risk of contracting FeLV and FIV. Current research also links cats exposed to tobacco smoke to higher numbers of gastrointestinal lymphoma.

## Diagnosis

Initial symptoms may be mild and non-specific such as lethargy, inappetence, weight loss, depression, and increased thirst and urination 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. For example, gastrointestinal lymphoma will cause vomiting and diarrhea, while cutaneous (skin) lymphoma will cause a non-healing wound. A lymph node and/or organ biopsy (gastrointestinal tract) is generally the preferred method for definitive diagnosis. These samples are often used for further testing to classify the type to more precisely predict behavior, prognosis, and advise treatment. Other diagnostics used for staging include infectious disease testing, blood tests, urinalysis, chest x-rays, abdominal ultrasound with organ aspirates, exploratory surgery, CT, MRI, and bone marrow tests.

## Treatment and Management

Multi-drug and single drug intravenous chemotherapy are currently the most effective treatments for feline lymphoma. Fortunately, cats tolerate the side effects of chemotherapy better than humans and experience milder, more manageable side effects. Surgery with radiation therapy can provide benefit for some feline lymphoma patients. Alternative therapies, such as herbal, nutritional, and supplemental, are available, but must be given safely. Steroids alone with symptomatic management are 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 generally is not considered a curable disease. The prognosis with chemotherapy is favorable. As high as 75% of patients may experience partial to

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complete remission(s) that may provide an average of a year of survival time, though cancer recurrence is inevitable. Steroids alone may not extend survival time beyond the average reported two months, however, quality of life tends to be good. Broadly, older pets and those with other diseases and/or illness upon diagnosis have a 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 cat.

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## *Management Tips*

### *Consider providing:*

- Easily accessible food and water
- Access to safe, quiet areas
- Warm, soft sleeping areas
- Modifying slippery surfaces to increase traction
- 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 appetite, bowel movements, breathing, weight, vomiting, etc.
- Limit stress (kids, noise)
- Manage weight with diets
- Consult with an oncologist
- Manage pain proactively
- Address concerns quickly
- Use low or no salt broth for flavor
- 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
- Keep up with preventative care
- Keep groomed and nails trimmed
- Do Not smoke around your cat
- Provide multiple litter boxes

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.