



CANINE OSTEOSARCOMA

Osteosarcoma is the most common bone cancer in dogs. It most often occurs in a front leg away from the elbow or a back leg close to the knee. It can also occur in bones of the spine or the skull. Because this is a serious disease that is rapidly fatal without correct treatment, your veterinarian will want to get a certain diagnosis very quickly. This can be done by taking a biopsy, a surgical specimen from the tumor, and having a laboratory examine the sample. In some cases, the lesion is so aggressive that limb amputation may be necessary immediately - the sample is then taken at the time of surgery and submitted. Although the surgery required to remove an osteosarcoma is aggressive, you must realize that this is the only effective form of pain control for the condition. Most dogs do very well after surgery, and are typically more comfortable within a few days of surgery than they were before. Medication is an effective alternative to surgery for relieving pain for this tumor type. Dogs generally will not show symptoms of chronic pain - by the time it is severe enough to notice, for example by decreased appetite, the dog has suffered enormous discomfort.

Chest x-rays are often taken prior to surgery. If the tumor can be seen in the chest (about a 10% chance), the prognosis is very poor, and it may be kinder to consider euthanasia rather than treatment. If there is no tumor visible in the chest, this means that the cancer is not advanced (but will almost certainly be hiding there) and that cancer treatment is likely to be worthwhile. Unfortunately, because 95% of dogs with osteosarcoma have had their tumor spread before it was detectable (it probably started as a single cancer cell up to 3 years ago), if surgery is the only treatment, most dogs will not live more than 2-3 months. With cancer therapy, about half of dogs will live 16 months or more, and one in 4 or 5 will be cured. Because dogs can't ask to be treated, we don't believe that it's fair to treat them so aggressively that they are likely to be sick during treatment. Although there is a small risk of this, 70% of our patients have no side effects at all, and another 25% have only brief, mild problems. One dog in 20, therefore, can have a serious reaction to the medication which is almost always successfully and rapidly controlled.

Because of the nature of the drugs that are used to treat osteosarcoma, you will need to be referred to the Murdoch Animal Cancer Care Unit at Murdoch university. In many cases, your veterinarian will be the best person to do the initial surgery.

It is important to remember that all the treatment for this disease is designed to restore quality of life, and to then provide as much time as possible. Nobody wants to extend your pet's life for anyone's benefit other than that of your pet.