

What is feline lymphoma?

Lymphoma is one of the most common types of cancers found in cats. It is a cancer of the lymphocytes, which are white blood cells that are part of the immune system. They are found throughout the body and are responsible for helping the body fight off infections. Lymphoma can occur in many areas of the body including the gastrointestinal tract, kidneys, liver, lymph nodes, skin, chest cavity and nasal cavity. The gastrointestinal tract is the most common region affected. Generally, lymphoma is found in older cats, with males being slightly more predisposed than females. Cats that are FIV or FeLV positive are more likely to develop this disease.

What are the clinical signs?

Clinical signs typically depend upon the location or organ system involved. Common signs include vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss, decreased appetite, and lethargy. Other symptoms can include respiratory distress (if the chest or nasal cavity is involved), increased water consumption and urination, nasal discharge, and/or facial swelling. If the cancer presents as a large mass, it is important to find out whether organ function is affected (i.e. GI tract, kidney, liver).

How is it diagnosed?

The main method of diagnosing feline lymphoma is with a fine needle aspirate or biopsy of the affected organ or tissue. Once a diagnosis has been made, staging is recommended. Staging consists of several diagnostics tests to help determine the extent of disease. Bloodwork consists of a CBC to assess the red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets, a chemistry panel to look at organ function, and a urinalysis. Radiographs of the thorax are taken to look for intrathoracic lymph node enlargement and/or lung involvement. An abdominal ultrasound is performed to look for liver, spleen, kidney, stomach, intestinal or lymph node involvement. Lymphoma is categorized as high (large cell) or low grade (small cell), which determines the biological nature of the tumor. Once the cancer is graded and staged, we can determine the prognosis for your pet's presentation and customize his or her treatment.

What are the treatment options?

Though feline lymphoma is generally an aggressive cancer, there are several treatment options. Chemotherapy is very effective at treating lymphoma. The goal of chemotherapy is to get your pet into remission for as long as possible with minimal side effects. The "gold standard" for treating high-grade gastrointestinal lymphoma in cats is a multi-agent chemotherapy approach. This involves the use of prednisone (a steroid that has anti-tumor activity), along with four other chemotherapy drugs. This therapy generally offers the longest disease free interval, but is expensive and requires frequent reassessments over a 4-6 month period. There are other less intensive chemotherapy protocols, but the remission times are not as long. For low-grade lymphoma, chemotherapy is recommended, but it is not as intense as previously described, and can consist of oral medication that is given at home.

There are some cases where surgery (solitary intestinal mass, especially one that is causing an obstruction) or radiation therapy (nasal lymphoma) can be used. If these treatments are used, it is recommended that they be used in conjunction with chemotherapy.

For owners that decide not to pursue chemotherapy for a variety of reasons, we recommend prednisone therapy. Prednisone, as discussed above, has some anti-tumor activity, but is mostly used to make your pet feel better. A median survival time of 1-2 months is associated with prednisone use alone for high grade lymphoma.

What is the prognosis?

Prognosis for feline lymphoma is most commonly predicted by the grade (high vs low), the severity of clinical signs upon presentation, location of the disease, his or her viral status, and initial response to therapy. Small cell lymphoma (low grade) is associated with an excellent prognosis with most cats living two or more years on oral chemotherapy at home. However, high grade lymphoma (large cell) is associated with a poorer prognosis with the majority of cats succumbing to the illness within the first year after diagnosis. Cats that have severe clinical signs upon diagnosis and/or are FeLV positive typically carry a worse prognosis. Extranodal presentations such as central nervous system, renal, or bone marrow involvement often carry a less favorable prognosis even with aggressive therapy. Conversely, nasal lymphoma carries a more favorable prognosis. Initial response to chemotherapy, usually noted within the first 3-4 weeks of treatment, is highly prognostic with cats that have a complete response early on having a significantly improved prognosis over those cats that do not respond.