



Mast Cell Tumors

Mast Cell Tumors (MCTs) are a relatively common skin cancer of dogs. Their appearance can vary although they tend to be round, discreet masses found within the superficial skin layers. Any dog can be affected by MCTs, regardless of age or breed, but they do tend to be more common in older dogs and there is a high incidence rate in Boxers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers.

“What is a Mast Cell Tumor?”

A normal Mast Cell is part of your pet’s immune defense system against invading organisms. Mast Cells participate in the war against parasites and they are also partly responsible for allergic reactions. Mast Cell Tumors are a collection of unstable Mast Cells with a high rate of growth that release toxic granules at random and send out long, finger-like projection of cells into the surrounding tissue.

“How do you diagnose a Mast Cell Tumor?”

MCT’s may be diagnosed by performing a Fine Needle Aspirate or wedge biopsy. A Fine Needle Aspirate involves injecting the mass several times with a large needle to harvest a sample of the mass’s cells without the need for an anaesthetic. The wedge biopsy involves an anesthetic and small surgical procedure to remove a small wedge of tissue from the mass for analysis.

Unfortunately, each of these techniques have their shortcomings and, if a MCT is suspected, the best thing for your pet is to have the mass completely removed and then analyzed.

“Is a Mast Cell Tumor treatable?”

Yes, MCTs can be treated with surgical removal but, as with all cancers, the sooner they are removed the better. MCT’s can have a tendency to invade local tissue, and aggressive types can spread throughout the body to affect other organs, so they are removed with a wide margin of healthy tissue. Chemotherapy or radiation therapy may also be indicated in a few cases. Early detection, diagnosis and surgery is the key

“What does the future hold for my pet?”

Although MCTs are a troubling disease, the news is not all bad. Analysis of the MCT will allow us to grade it in terms of its aggressiveness. A low grade mass, completely removed with surgery, will not grow back and is extremely unlikely to spread to other tissues. Unfortunately, higher grade MCTs do have a tendency to spread and carry with them a poorer prognosis for the future.

If you have any questions about your pet’s lump, or are concerned about any aspect of the diagnosis or treatment of MCTs, please do not hesitate to ask.

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