

BENIGN OR MALIGNANT

Tumors in Animals

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It can be difficult to understand the difference between a malignant (cancerous) tumor and a benign (non-cancerous) tumor, especially when it comes to our pets. If your pet has a growth, it should be evaluated by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Sometimes doctors are able to make an educated guess by looking at several factors (breed, age, location and appearance of the tumor, etc), but it is impossible to make a definitive diagnosis without cytology or biopsy – where cells or tissue from the growth are evaluated by a pathologist to determine the type of the tumor, and whether it is malignant or benign.

The most common type of benign tumor is a lipoma, or fatty tumor, that generally develops just under the skin in older or overweight pets. These tumors typically do not pose a health risk and many veterinarians will only remove a lipoma if the tumor is large enough to cause the patient to have trouble walking or is rapidly growing. Other types of benign tumors are adenomas, basal cell tumors, follicular cysts, and histiocytomas. If your pet has been diagnosed with a benign tumor, talk to your veterinarian about surgical intervention versus conservative treatment. Some benign tumors should still be removed surgically, as they can grow to a large size, become ulcerated, or affect the patient's health. Other benign tumors can simply be monitored for

growth over time.

When pet owners are faced with the possibility of a malignant tumor, it can be surprising and alarming. For some cases of suspected cancerous tumors, the veterinarian or surgeon will recommend surgical excision immediately, and obtain a biopsy during removal. The need for swift action in some cases is due to the



fact that in many suspected malignant tumors, the possibility of metastatic disease is high. Metastatic disease occurs when the primary tumor spreads microscopic cancerous cells into other areas or organs in the body, which will begin to grow into new malignant tumors, often in the chest or abdomen. The radiograph above shows an example of a common

bone cancer, called osteosarcoma, which can metastasize within months. Notice the difference in the bone quality of the affected area – almost as though the bone is bursting out – this is a classic indicator of a malignant bone tumor. With any suspected malignant tumor, chest radiographs and possibly an abdominal ultrasound should be performed prior to surgery to make sure the primary tumor has not begun to metastasize to other areas of the body. If metastatic disease is present, the patient's long-term prognosis is guarded, and the surgeon may not recommend proceeding with surgery at that point. Some types of malignant tumors can be cured through complete excision with good "margins". When a surgeon refers to "margins" they are describing the amount of healthy tissue the pathologist finds around the area of malignancy. The goal when removing a tumor is to get "clean" margins, which means the pathologist only sees healthy, normal tissue all around the area of the tumor. This often greatly reduces the chance of the tumor recurring or spreading.

If your pet is diagnosed with a tumor, talk to your veterinarian about what kind of tumor you are dealing with, what your options are, and what type of diagnostics are recommended for your pet. In some cases, a consultation with a board-certified veterinary surgeon may be necessary.