

Skin Cancer is Not Just a Human Disease

Everyone has heard about the risks and dangers of skin cancer. We know that we should cover our children with a high SPF sun block before they go out to play in the sun, and we understand that we need to protect our own adult skin as well. But, what about our pets?

Are animals at risk of developing skin cancer? Absolutely. Most people are surprised to learn that the family dog or cat is very susceptible to the sun's damaging rays, and care must be taken for their welfare as well as ours. Common sense tells us to limit our pets' exposure to direct sunlight during peak hours, and provide plenty of shade.

The sun is not the only cause of skin cancer in pets, but it certainly is a major contributor. Other factors leading to animals' skin cancer include hormones, viruses, burns, and inoculations. Also, just like humans, some animals have a genetic predisposition to developing skin cancer. It is a disease that can run in your pet's family, as well as yours.

Like their fair-skinned human counterparts, light colored dogs and cats are at greater risk of developing skin cancer. Pets with white fur are, of course, at the higher end of the risk scale. Any parts of the body where the coat is thin are at greatest risk. The stomach, inside of a dog's hind legs, and the ear tips, pink noses and outer eye areas on cats. Hairless breeds of dogs and cats have no protection from the sun's rays. Those breeds of dogs most at risk are Dalmatians, pit bulls, pointers and bull terriers. It's interesting to note that when a Dalmatian develops skin cancer, the disease will only strike the white areas, going around the black spots.

Skin cancer in pets, as in humans, usually strikes later in life. If your dog or cat has reached about nine years of age, it's wise to begin veterinary checkups every six months. When detected early enough, your pet will have a better survival rate.

Even early detection is not always enough. A lot can happen in six months, so it's important that, as your pet's caretaker, you are aware of how he or she normally behaves. If your pet seems to be in pain or discomfort, his or her normal behavior will change. That is a natural sign that it's time for a thorough physical check-up. You may also note changes in eating habits, weight loss or a disinterest in taking part in everyday activities like playing or going for a walk.

Be on the lookout for physical changes to your pet. If you note changes to moles, or newly developed sores on your pet, get him or her to the vet quickly.

Pets have been known to hide their discomforts, in a bid to avoid disappointing their owners. Dogs and cats are very sensitive to the moods of their owners and naturally want to please them. Other animals innately hide their symptoms out of fear. In the natural world, illness equates weakness, and weakness brings death. For this reason, it's only natural that your beloved pet may be hiding his or her illness from you.

Like humans, pets can develop skin cancer from excessive exposure to the sun. If your pet loves to spend time outdoors, be sure to provide a cool, shady resting spot, or simply limit the time spent outdoors to early morning or late afternoon and evening hours.