Veterinary Wisdom® About The Pet With Cancer

Dana Durrance, M.A.



Distributed by:
World by the Tail, Inc.
126 W. Harvard St, Ste. 5
Fort Collins, CO 80525
1-888-271-8444
info@wbtt.com
www.veterinarywisdom.com

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I've written this eBooklet for you if your beloved pet has been diagnosed with cancer. My goal is to help and support you as you move through this difficult time.

Cancer. Can there be a scarier word? The mere mention of it can send waves of panic and shock. One study found that people think the word "cancer" is scarier than the word "death." Just the mere mention of it can evoke frightening images of protracted illness, suffering, and death. If your beloved pet has been diagnosed with cancer, there are no adequate words I can say to take away the fear and sadness you are likely feeling. You may also be feeling very powerless and find yourself wondering what you will do now and where to go from here.

I want you to know that despite all the things you are feeling, you are ***not*** alone. It may feel that way right now, but there are scores of pet owners who have helped their pets with cancer. Many cancers are treatable, with pets living several years beyond diagnosis.

Please know, too, that I would like to support you as best as I can. While I can't know exactly what you're feeling, I have worked with hundreds of pet owners over the past decade who have dealt with cancer in their pets. I want to help you navigate some of the emotional waters you are now facing and help you sort through some of the issues that may arise in the next few weeks and months.

What Do I Do Now?

If your mind is reeling from over-stimulation, you should know that this is normal. Anytime we are faced with an emotional shock, our mind and emotions tend to kick into overdrive. You may even feel so overwhelmed, that you don't know what you're feeling. The best thing that you can do for yourself right now is to take a deep breath and take away any pressure you're putting on yourself to figure things out immediately. You will start to sort things out as you are given a chance to absorb and process what's going on.

Anticipatory Grief

Since the word cancer is often synonymous with the word death, your first thoughts and feelings may be of your pet's eventual death. Though your pet may not be facing death necessarily, your mind may still go there. Even though your pet is still alive, it's hard not to focus on the "worst case scenario". Many pet owners dealing with cancer feel this way. They often find themselves in the position of "hoping for the best" while trying to "prepare for the worst." This is very common and is part of what is known as "Anticipatory Grief." While this type of grief precedes an actual death, it still includes many of the same emotions of grief experienced after death. Sadness, depression, shock, anger, and guilt are all common emotions. You may even feel as though you've already lost your pet. This is completely normal and you should avoid self-recrimination if this is the case. This is simply your heart and mind's way of trying to prepare for a potential loss. Common characteristics of anticipatory grief include:

- An increase in anxiety. For many people, anxiety increases when there is some anticipation of death. It is common for people to mentally "rehearse" the event and its aftermath. Typically, people ponder questions like, "How will I handle the death?" "Will I make mistakes?" and "What will it be like for the one who is dying?" This is called the "work of worry."

- Emotionally withdrawing from the loved one. This helps to defend against the intensity of their feelings. People who withdraw too soon tend to talk rather unemotionally about the death and about what they will do after the death has occurred. They may also intellectualize or rationalize the experience in some way or use humor to deflect the situation. These behaviors may seem insensitive, yet they are a common way to cope.

- Moving too close to the loved one. This can occur when the person abandons all other things in life and becomes almost obsessed with the loved one. People sometimes move too close in an attempt to rid themselves of feelings of guilt and loss. This is particularly true when people are trying to handle ambivalent or conflicting feelings they have about the loved one. One of the hallmark characteristics of moving too close is needing to over manage the loved one's medical care.

Cancer is *Not* an Immediate Death Sentence

There are few of us out there who have not been affected by cancer in some form or another. We all have preconceived notions of what cancer means based upon those experiences. We are also influenced by societal messages, the media, and other forms of information we hear every day. Obviously, your personal history with cancer (either in yourself or with family and friends) will have a major influence on how you deal with cancer in your pet.

When it comes to deciding about treatment for your pet, be aware of the emotional "minefield" you may be walking into. This diagnosis of cancer does not necessarily mean your pet will die any time soon. Many types of cancers can be treated effectively and with fewer side effects than many people experience. As your veterinarian will tell you, cancer treatment in pets rarely is the same as cancer treatment in humans. Your pet, his/her overall health, the type and progression of the cancer are just a few of the factors that can determine how your pet may respond. The most important thing is to work carefully with your veterinarian to receive as much information as possible so you can make informed decisions.

Oncology, Radiology, and All the Other "ologies": Deciding Whether or Not to Treat

Chemotherapy. This is a word almost as frightening as cancer. The mere mention of it can scare you with images of hair loss, vomiting, and additional suffering. If you are exploring treatment options for your pet, be aware of how certain words like "chemotherapy" can evoke such strong emotions that they may color your judgment. In situations like these, pre-conceived ideas may interfere with your ability to hear and process vital information.

Your best course of action is to be aware of these emotions while taking a deep breath and allowing yourself to be open and flexible to what your veterinarian tells you. This is when you do have some power and can be a wonderful advocate for your pet. During this time, you will likely hear a lot of medical information that may sound a little confusing and overwhelming unless you've had medical training. Below is a list of strategies to try when deciding about treatment:

- **Obtain written copies of all pertinent medical information.** Because you are upset, you may have difficulty concentrating on the facts at hand. Your veterinarian may give you a lot of information regarding treatment options that may be overwhelming. Get all information in writing so that you can refer to it later on.

- **Write down all your questions.** It's unlikely that you will be able to think of everything at one time. Once you've had time to go through the written information, you will think of questions. Writing them down takes the pressure off to remember everything in a single conversation with your veterinarian.

- **<u>Find other resources that will help you become educated about your pet's cancer</u>**. Do research on your own from *credible* sources. Remember that knowledge is power

- **<u>Consult with your Veterinarian.</u>** You veterinarian is your ***most important*** resource! Talk openly with him/her about your concerns and ask specific questions about the progression of your pet's cancer. Consider your pet's expected prognosis and age. Consider how things may change a few weeks or months down the road. Questions to ask your veterinarian include:

    - ✓ What is the expected outcome if I opt for treatment? What is the projected best-case scenario? What is the worst-case scenario?

    - ✓ What are the potential side effects of treatment? How might they affect my pet and how long might they last?

    - ✓ What should I do if there is a crisis after hours or if I cannot contact the pet hospital?

- **<u>Consider quality of life issues.</u>** You will need to be an advocate for your pet and decide what the best guidelines are. Depending upon your pet's type, location, and extent of cancer this will vary greatly. Quality of life guidelines include both pain and suffering:

    <u>Pain</u> is a physical sensation that your veterinarian can help you identify and manage. Find out the cost and effectiveness of the medication that will be needed to control your pet's pain. Consider the following:

    - ✓ Does your veterinarian feel confident that your pet's pain can be alleviated?

    - ✓ Do you feel comfortable in giving your pet pain medication when your veterinarian is not available?

- ✓ Do you feel assured that you will be able to recognize when your pet is in pain?

- ✓ Do you have the necessary time in your schedule to take care of your pet appropriately? (This may include feeding, cleaning, carrying your pet up and down stairs, outside to go to the bathroom, and taking your pet to and from the animal hospital).

Suffering is a more vague term and can be difficult to define. This takes into account your pet's unique personality and temperament. The following questions are important to consider:

- ✓ What kind of habits, routines, or interactions constitutes your pet's daily life? What type of things make your pet "happy"? How will these routines end or be changed as a result of the cancer and treatment?

- ✓ Is your companion tolerant or afraid of visiting the pet hospital?

- ✓ Do the symptoms of the cancer and treatment require that your pet frequently be confined in the home or at the pet hospital? Is your pet able to interact with you?

- ✓ Do you have enough time in your schedule to care for your pet if he/she becomes more ill? Does your family realize what delaying treatment may entail?

- ✓ Is there someone who can help you if you become exhausted and need a break?

- **Consider financial implications.** It may not seem fair that you must make such decisions based on finances, but living in the real world requires you to do so. Do you have the financial resources or can you find other options such as a credit card, assistance from family or friends, or other options. Many veterinarians offer "Care Credit" (a third party payment plan).

- **Consider your personal resources.** The treatment of certain types of cancers can mean a big personal commitment (such as specialty surgeries or radiation therapy). This may include taking your pet out of town or out of state to specialty veterinary practices or veterinary teaching hospitals. Do you have the necessary time in your schedule and personal life to make such a commitment?

- **Talk with other pet owners who have dealt with cancer.** Ask your veterinarian for names or investigate on your own. Talk with them about their experiences and feelings. If they chose treatment for their pet, would they do it again? What, if anything, do they regret?

Referrals to Outside Resources

In most cases, your own veterinarian will be able to treat your pet's cancer and will not need to refer you to an outside resource. Most general practitioners are highly qualified to treat cancer whether it is chemotherapy or surgery. However, if your pet has a specific type of cancer, there may be a reason to refer you to another veterinarian called a "specialist". These veterinarians have particular training in distinct areas of veterinary medicine. To help you understand the different types of specialists, I have included a brief description below. Remember that your own veterinarian is the **best** resource to explain these to you.

For the treatment of cancer, the veterinary specialists you would most likely see include:

- **Veterinary Internist:** These are board certified doctors who have completed a residency (3-4 years) in internal medicine beyond that of veterinary school. These doctors can administer chemotherapy if, for some reason, a general practitioner does not.
    - **Veterinary Oncologist:** This is a sub-specialty for Veterinary Internists. They are board certified internists who have spent most or all of their residency (3-4 years) focusing strictly on the diagnosis and treatment of cancer.
- **Veterinary Surgeon:** These are board certified doctors who have completed a residency (3-4 years) in surgery. Some veterinary surgeons focus specifically on cancer treatment while others do not. You would most likely be referred to a veterinary surgeon if your pet's cancer treatment involves a highly specialized surgery.

Deciding Not to Treat

If you have opted against treating your pet's cancer, I'm sure that this was a difficult decision and you have made it with your pet's best interests in mind while considering many factors. Certainly, you did not make this choice lightly and have done so because you love your pet and are doing what you think is best in your heart. It takes a tremendous amount of love to set aside our own fears of loss and grief to do what we think is best for our loved ones. You may be struggling with a whole host of feelings including grief, sadness, anger, and guilt.

Although this is a very difficult time, there are still many things that you can do to support yourself and your pet. If you have decided against treatment for whatever reason, you may need to think about euthanasia for your pet at some point in time. You probably have many questions about what to expect as your pet's cancer progresses, how to help your pet, how to make sense of your feelings, and when to decide for euthanasia. I would like to offer you my support for all these issues and questions. I have written a separate e-booklet that addresses these concerns ("Saying Good-Bye To Your Beloved Pet: A Supportive Guide Through Euthanasia.") To obtain a copy of this booklet, simply contact World by the Tail, Inc. at www.veterinarywisdom.com.

Cyclophosphamide, Doxorubicin and Other Words You Can't Pronounce: Deciding to Treat

If you've chosen to treat your pet's cancer, you are now entering a world that can be difficult, complicated, and rewarding all at the same time. As you become more accustomed to the thought of your pet having cancer, you will probably find it easier to focus on the little details that will become so important. Because the treatment of cancer is so varied and encompasses so many issues, I've created a list of things you may want to do and consider:

- Make a list of all the medications your pet will be taking. Unless you've had medical training, some of these names may be confusing and even hard to pronounce. Write everything down and ask your veterinarian what each medication does and why it will be given to your pet. Be aware of the potential side effects of each medication.

- Ask your veterinarian what you should do if your pet experiences medication side effects and how you can alleviate his/her discomfort.

- Have supplies on-hand that you will need for your pet. If your pet gets sick in the middle of the night, you do not want to be running out to the store. Plan ahead of time to make things less difficult for you and for your pet.

- Create a treatment schedule for your pet. The treatment of some cancers requires a strict schedule (e.g., chemotherapy every three weeks or radiation therapy for a week at a time). Write or input the schedule on your personal calendar so that you won't forget important timelines or appointments.

- Talk with your employer if you will need certain days or times off work to take your pet in for treatment. Anticipate and address any problems or concerns this may cause. You may need to use some vacation days or sick leave.

- Talk with your family about how your pet's treatment may affect them as a whole. Cancer treatment can be time consuming and take you away from other family and/or child obligations. You should also talk about how the pet's treatment may affect transportation issues (rides to school, appointments, etc.) You may need to make alternate transportation arrangements for awhile

.

- Seek assistance from family, friends, or anyone else who can help you. You will probably need extra help at some point. Set a good support system in place ahead of time so you're not scrambling at the last minute.

- Plan ahead if you need to leave town. Some cancer treatments require highly specialized surgeries that can only be done at large pet hospitals or veterinary schools. Consider how you and your pet will travel, what time it will take to get there, and how long the trip is expected to be. Consider lodging requirements if you and your pet need to stay for an extended period of time. Many hotels and motels allow pets but you will need to research this ahead of time. Remember that you will incur additional costs for things like gas, lodging, and food.

How Will Treatment Affect Our Relationship?

The answer is as varied as the people and pets involved. Many people fear that if they treat their pet's cancer, it will permanently alter their relationship. Over the years, I've heard various reactions from many pet owners. For some, they feel that they became even closer to their pet for having made the emotional, practical, and financial commitment. They report a new "bonding" in a way that they never had before. This is especially true if they traveled a long way and stayed in hotels and motels during their pet's treatment.

Others have told me that they became somewhat "detached" from their pet during the course of treatment because of the unexpected results or side effects of treatment. Still others have reported never feeling closer to their pet because they have been through such a difficult experience together and have come to appreciate the fragile nature of life itself.

Whatever the result of your pet's treatment, remember that you and your pet have always shared a special relationship and been able to communicate with each other in a unique way. This is still true and will continue to be true during your pet's treatment. The best thing is to love your pet in the same way you always have and to trust that your special relationship will always be there. Talk to your pet; tell him/her what is happening, and why you've chosen the course you are on. Your love is the strongest and most important comfort your pet will need.

Your Needs

You may wonder why talking about your needs seems so important when your pet is the one with cancer. The answer is quite logical. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of your pet. Your pet's cancer treatment may be physically demanding and emotionally exhausting. Throughout this whole process, you may be tempted to neglect your own needs because they seem least important. This is a mistake! You need to make yourself a priority too! If you must, think of it as another way to support your pet, but *do it*. Don't consider it to be selfish, consider it to be essential.

Be aware that you will expect yourself to be perfect. Since you love your pet, you expect to be perfect in all your decisions and in everything you do. This is simply not possible. You are not a supreme being but a human one who is doing the very best you can on a daily basis. Since your love for your pet sets you up for impossible standards, you may feel guilty when you can't meet them. Be kind to yourself if this happens. Nothing is gained by making yourself feel guilty.

The last thing I want to say to you is that although you may feel isolated and alone, **you aren't.** Remember that many of the emotions you are feeling are completely normal and natural. Give yourself the same support that you give so readily to your pet. If you are having trouble finding sources of support within your own circle of family and friends, don't hesitate to reach out to others. There are so many pet owners who have dealt with cancer in their pets! Don't go it alone because you simply don't have to! Visit the Veterinary Wisdom® website at www.veterinarywisdom.com to find people and resources that can assist you. Take care of yourself. I wish you and your pet well.

Inside the Veterinary Hospital

If your pet has been diagnosed with cancer, your relationship with your veterinarian will likely become a very important one in the next few weeks and months. Unless you have medical knowledge, you will be relying on your veterinarian to give you essential knowledge in understanding, and deciding about treating your pet's cancer. You both will be important partners in your pet's well being.

You may already enjoy a good rapport with your veterinarian, but you will want to establish a good system of communication early on so that you and your pet can receive the support and treatment that you need.

One way to do this is to make clear what your expectations are up front. Like anyone else, veterinarians are not mind readers and they won't always know what you're thinking or feeling. It's best to take an open, honest approach and to tell your veterinarian what you need and what is most helpful to you. Be honest about your feelings and if you are frustrated, tell him/her in a calm non-judgmental way. Although this is a very difficult and emotional time, you don't want to come across as attacking or alienating one of the people you need the most!

Some veterinarians are better communicators than others, but all of them care about their patients and clients and will work hard to support you if you make your needs and wishes clear. Keep in mind that your anxiety can create some unrealistic expectations so you should consider carefully what you expect from your veterinarian and if he/she can meet those expectations. People who are feeling highly anxious often become more demanding than they normally would because they want extra reassurance during a stressful time. If you talk openly about your expectations, you may be able to avoid any misunderstandings down the road.

Between You and Me

So let's talk about something you may be feeling more than anything else right now…anxiety. Yes, anxiety…an emotion that can literally stop you dead in your tracks. As a card-carrying member of the anxiety club myself, I certainly know how debilitating anxiety can be.

If your pet has been diagnosed with cancer, anxiety is unavoidable. Of course you feel anxious at the prospect of your pet becoming ill, perhaps suffering, and even dying. That's an avalanche of emotions cascading down on you and I'm sure you feel like running away or hiding.

The first thing to do is breathe! Breathing won't change what's happening with your pet, but it will get you through the next few minutes. Ultimately, I think that is the key with anxiety. You need to deal with it one moment at a time. Dealing with anxiety one moment, one hour, and one day at a time is a good way to preserve your sanity. If you think too far ahead, you will become even more overwhelmed that you already are. I have found in my own life that anxiety only breeds more anxiety and it becomes too much to bear.

The second thing to do is reach out! Share your anxiety with others so you won't have to handle it all alone. Anxiety always tends to lessen if you speak out and give it a voice. As you go through this, be aware that there are many resources and places to go for support. Take advantage of this! If you are to survive this anxiety, you may need to reach out so it doesn't consume you.

About the Author

Dana Durrance is a veterinary grief specialist/consultant for World by the Tail, Inc. She is the former director of the nationally renowned Changes Program at the CSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital and has over a decade of experience as a grief counselor, educator and trainer within the veterinary profession.

She is also the co-owner and grief counselor at Mountain Shadows Pet Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colorado (which she owns with her husband--a small animal veterinarian). She hold a Masters degree in clinical psychology and has a wealth of experience working with hundreds of pet owners as well as training veterinary professionals at national veterinary conferences, veterinary hospitals and schools. She has published in multiple veterinary-related books, journals and textbooks. She has presented at over 45 conferences, seminars, and workshops and is a regular speaker at Alameda East Veterinary Hospital (home of Animals Planet's Emergency Vets).

She lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado with her husband Steve, their daughter Erin, son Noah, and their three dogs.

About the ePublisher

World by the Tail, Inc.

World by the Tail, Inc., honors the emotional power of the human-animal bond. Love. Protectiveness. Gratitude. Grief. These powerful feelings are part and parcel of lives shared with companion animals.

Emotions are meant to be shared and supported. Whether you are a veterinarian, animal health technician, mental health professional or pet lover, World by the Tail, Inc., exists to support your efforts on behalf of companion animals. We want to help you celebrate the good times shared with animals—first days of puppyhood, medical rescues, cat show championships ---as well as deal with the difficulties--- chronic disease, the stress of care giving, terminal illness and companion animal death.

At World by the Tail, we care for people who care for pets.

Contact us at 1-888-271-8444 or online at www.veterinarywisdom.com.
We can also be reached via email at info@wbtt.com.

A Personal Note from Us to You

If you are reading this book, you will probably be saying a final good-bye to your beloved pet in the very near future. At World by the Tail, Inc., we understand that this is an emotionally difficult time. Each of us has experienced the grief of pet loss, too.

Because we've been there, we want you to know about a special keepsake that helped each of us cope during the days and weeks following our pets' deaths. That keepsake is a ClayPaws® print.

A ClayPaws ® print is a life size impression of your pet's paw set in a modeling clay compound. A ClayPaws ® print is as individual as a human fingerprint and is symbolic of the deep relationships we share with our beloved pets. In our experience, ClayPaws ® prints are one of the best ways you can pay tribute to the special bond you have shared with your pet.

At World by the Tail, Inc., we manufacture and distribute ClayPaws ®, the original paw print kit™, so we can provide comfort to people like you when your companion animals die. We recommend that you make a print for each child and adult in your family.

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"I wanted to let you know how much ClayPaws® has meant to us. Satin, our first of two litter mate sisters, passed away July 2004 from cancer. Her sister Silkie passed away in February 2005, also from cancer. Both veterinary hospitals that treated our girls offered us the chance to forever capture additional memories of the "girls" by using your product ClayPaws ® to do their paw prints. It has meant the world to us! Thanks again for your product. We wouldn't trade our ClayPaws ® prints for anything."

Linda and Ron F., Pet Owners