MALIGNANT LYMPHOMA in DOGS (LYMPHOSARCOMA)

Lymphoma is a cancer of a white blood cell called a lymphocyte. These cells normally help to fight off infections in the body, and are found primarily in the lymph nodes. When a dog has lymphoma, these cells multiply out of control and can cause enlarged lymph nodes. The lymphocytes can also multiply in other organs, or can cause problems in the bone marrow. (The bone marrow is where all cells in the blood, both white and red, originate.)

What causes lymphoma?
Lymphoma is a type of cancer that arises when a normal cell is mutated or changed to a tumor cell. We do not know why canine lymphoma occurs, and there is no known way to prevent it.

How common is lymphoma?
Lymphoma is one of the most common cancers in dogs. It occurs in about 24 out of every 100,000 dogs, and is most common in older dogs.

What are the signs of lymphoma?
Several forms of the disease occur. The most common form is the multicentric form, which affects the lymph nodes, spleen and liver. Many dogs with this form will have enlarged lymph nodes but no other symptoms. Some dogs will have vague signs of lethargy, weight loss and not eating. The gastrointestinal form of the disease is less common. This form affects the stomach and intestines, and can cause vomiting and diarrhea. Occasionally the disease affects only lymph nodes inside the chest or other body sites.

What tests are needed to diagnose lymphoma?
Usually the enlarged lymph node is sampled with a small needle (a fine needle aspirate). Blood tests, such as a complete blood count and a blood chemistry panel, are usually performed to determine if the other blood cells are affected and if internal organs are affected. Sometimes a lymph node or organ will need to be surgically biopsied. Some forms of the disease require specialized diagnostics (i.e. X-rays, ultrasound, endoscopy, etc.).

Can the disease be treated?
Some forms of lymphoma respond well to chemotherapy. The disease needs to be diagnosed and staged to determine what type of therapy is best.
What is chemotherapy?
Chemotherapy is a treatment protocol in which drugs that are toxic to the tumor cells are given to the animal, following a special schedule. Some drugs can be given in pill form, while others need to be given directly into a vein. The protocols for lymphoma chemotherapy change frequently as more research is done, so we work with veterinary oncologists (cancer specialists) to determine the best protocol for your pet.

Will chemotherapy make my pet sick?
Some animals will have reactions to some of the medications used. These drugs are very potent and have a potential for toxicity. In general, however, dogs and cats tolerate chemotherapy much better than people do, and do not usually have the problems that we associate with human cancer therapy (i.e. nausea, hair loss, etc.). Your veterinarian will discuss with you what you can expect from the various types of drug therapy.

How long does chemotherapy last, and how much will it cost?
Your veterinarian will give you an estimate of treatment costs based on the size of the animal, the stage of the disease and current therapy recommendations. Treatment generally lasts several months. Treatment may start at several times a week, then taper down to weekly or every other week, then every third week, etc. Treatment is highly dependent on the response of the disease.

What if I decide not to pursue chemotherapy for my pet?
Your veterinarian can help you make the best decision for you and your pet. If you decide not to pursue chemotherapy, there is a medication (Prednisone) that can be given in tablet form that can prolong survival and decrease symptoms in certain animals. This drug is not as effective as other types of therapy, however.