



Cancer Treatment for Dogs and Cats

By Kim Hillers, DVM, MS, DACVIM (Oncology)

Due to advanced diagnostics and improved health care, more animals are being diagnosed with cancer each day. Some cancers can be completely eradicated using combined methods of treatment. Although other cancers are not curable, we can temporarily reverse animals' clinical signs of illness and dramatically improve their quality of life. As pets become more integral parts of our families, veterinary medicine has become more advanced to provide the best care for your furry family members. Just as in human medicine, "oncologists," doctors with advanced training in cancer treatment, are available to help your pet.

What is a veterinary oncologist?

A veterinary oncologist is a veterinarian who specializes in cancer treatment for dogs and cats. A veterinary oncologist sees only patients with cancer and spends each day educating others and treating dogs and cats with cancer.

Veterinary oncologists have undergone specialized training in cancer diagnosis and treatment. Following veterinary school, most oncologists pursue a one-year internship working with specialists in the areas of internal medicine, surgery, and other fields of medicine (i.e. dentistry, cardiology, etc.). Another aspect of the internship includes an emphasis on emergency medicine. If an internship was not pursued, then two to three years of general practice were completed before applying for a three-year residency in oncology.

Usually less than 10 to 15 openings nationwide are available for specialized training in oncology. These positions are highly coveted and competitive. Once accepted, for the next three years, these veterinarians treat animals with cancer under the guidance and supervision of board certified veterinary oncologists, specialists who have earned national certification in their field. Most programs offer multidisciplinary experience in chemotherapy, surgery, radiation therapy, pathology, and novel treatments like immunotherapy. Some academic university settings also require their residents to complete a masters program, which involves additional coursework and research in veterinary cancer.

At the end of the second and third year, oncology residents must pass two rigorous exams: one in the area of internal medicine, and one specializing in veterinary oncology and even aspects of human oncology. Veterinary oncologists are trained not only in the clinical aspects of cancer, but also in the molecular aspects of cancer to help better understand the rationale for various treatments.

My dog was just diagnosed with cancer. I don't think I'm going to pursue further treatment. Do I need to see an oncologist?

As veterinary oncologists, our goals are to provide more information and education about your pet's specific cancer. Not all cancers are alike. Some cancers behave in a very benign fashion and are unlikely to be fatal. On the other hand, some cancers are very aggressive and are associated with a poor prognosis if there is no further treatment.

Before final decisions are made, it may be beneficial to speak with someone who has treated your pet's type of cancer more often than your family veterinarian. The oncologist can provide a more complete list of treatment options and prognostic information. Even if you elect not to pursue treatment, the information gained from meeting with an oncologist may provide more peace of mind with your decision. Furthermore, you will have a better idea of what to expect long-term.

My cat was just diagnosed with cancer, and my vet is sending me to a surgeon. Should I see an oncologist first?

Ideally, we think it is wise that you have as much information as possible before a potentially expensive and even risky surgery is performed. That way expectations and goals are understood before big decisions are made. There are times that the surgeon is not able to remove a tumor completely. What does that mean? That means that the tumor will return, and the long-term goal of getting rid of the cancer may not be attained. A veterinary oncologist can help give you more prognostic information as to whether the tumor can be completely removed, what further diagnostics may help ensure the best outcome, and what treatment options may be necessary if the tumor cannot be removed completely with surgery alone.

What is the difference between a "medical" veterinary oncologist and a "radiation" veterinary oncologist?

Veterinary medical oncologists have completed specialized training in cancer treatment, focusing mostly on chemotherapy and novel therapies. Throughout their training, they worked closely with surgeons and radiation oncologists, but they were not trained to perform advanced procedures in those areas.

Veterinary radiation oncologists pursued advanced training in physics, radiation safety, and radiation therapy for dogs and cats. Radiation therapy is generally used to help treat a specific area, while chemotherapy is used to treat the whole body. Throughout their training, radiation oncologists worked with medical oncologists and surgeons, but they did not receive extensive training in chemotherapy or surgery.

A board certified veterinary medical oncologist will have the following letters behind his/her name: DACVIM. ACVIM is an acronym for the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (www.acvim.org). A board certified veterinary radiation oncologist will have the following letters behind his/her name: DACVR. ACVR is an acronym for the American College of Veterinary Radiation (www.acvr.org).

I've spoken with someone who regretted treating his pet for cancer. I don't want my dog to suffer.

Everyone has different experiences, each animal responds differently, and expectations of treatment vary. The goal of veterinary oncology is to extend your pet's life while maintaining the pet's quality of life. For those of us who have lost a family member to cancer, we tend to remember the "end" the most. Most animals experience improved quality of life once treatment is started. Animals rarely die because of their treatment; they die because their cancer was stronger than the treatment. Thus, their quality of life was not destroyed by the treatment, but by their disease. If it appears that our treatment is no longer effective, then options are discussed, and further treatment is not mandatory.

Southwest Veterinary Oncology was the first practice in Arizona to offer specialized cancer treatment for dogs and cats. Our oncologists have trained at some of the best programs in the nation, and they consult with each other and other specialists to offer the best care possible. Five offices are available to help serve our communities in Tucson, Gilbert, Glendale, and Scottsdale.

If your pet has sadly been diagnosed with cancer, we understand the trauma associated with that diagnosis. Our goal is to help you and your pet get through this difficult time and together determine an optimal course of action. Please visit our websites for more information and call if you would like to set up an appointment.

In Gilbert at:

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86 W. Juniper Avenue, Ste. 5
Gilbert, Arizona 85233
Phone: 480.635.1110 Fax: 480.892.0540
www.azvs.com

In Glendale at:

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