

Our receptionist leaves me a note saying “Spotty’s” owner Ms. Shesworried wants me to call her back. She found a lump on “Spotty” today and she wants to know what it could be. As I dial her phone number I suspect what “Spotty”’s owner really wants to know is “...is it cancer?”

I’m often asked to evaluate a lump or swelling an owner has found on their pet. In fact, after problems with ears, allergies and fleas it’s probably the most common thing I am asked about.

There are a number of questions a veterinarian will want answers to when evaluating a pet with a lump or mass. How old is the animal? How long has the lump been there? Is it changing in size? Are there any other lumps that appear similar to it? Is the lump hard, soft, or fluctuant (fluid filled)? Is it painful to the touch? Is it smooth or irregular? Is it a part of the skin, on the surface of the skin, or under the skin? Is it mobile or sessile? Is the overlying skin normal or are there abnormalities like hair-loss or skin color change? Most of the answers for these questions come from a good exam and/or an astute pet owner.

While this information allows the veterinarian to narrow the list of possibilities significantly, a conclusive diagnosis is usually not possible without a microscopic assessment of the cells that make-up the mass. The cells needed for this evaluation process, called pathology or cytology, are collected via a biopsy or a fine needle aspirate of the mass. Fine needle aspirates for cytology are usually quite safe, simple and essentially painless. A small hypodermic needle is inserted into the mass. Using a syringe to create suction, cells are gently aspirated into the needle bore and hub. The cells collected are smeared onto a glass slide, dried, stained and evaluated under high power magnification. Sometimes this evaluation is done by the veterinarian “in-house”, or is sent to a pathologist at a diagnostic lab.

Biopsies require taking an actual piece of tissue from the mass and submitting it to the laboratory for assessment. This process is more involved and costly than a fine needle aspirate (minor surgery is required), but allows better cellular evaluation and a more complete and accurate diagnosis

In most cases the pathologist has the final say about a lump. If there is some concern about cancer, timely removal of the mass (if possible) is usually recommended. If the mass is removed the entire tissue is again submitted for analysis so the pathologist can evaluate the surgical margins to be sure the mass was entirely removed.

Thankfully most lumps and bumps in pets are benign, non-cancerous growths. Interestingly, even benign growths can cause problems if they become quite large, are growing in the wrong place, bleed or become infected. For this reason, some benign growths require surgery as well.

Discovering a new lump on a pet can be a concerning finding for any pet owner. The first thing everyone worries about is cancer. While that’s one possibility, there are actually many less worrisome things that it could be. The best advice I can give a worried pet owner is to have their veterinarian check it out right away. A needle aspirate or biopsy will usually help guide how much worrying we really have to do. Remember, in the unlikely event it is a cancerous growth, waiting to have it diagnosed will only make it more difficult and more costly to successfully treat.

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