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SPLEEN AND LIVER CANCER IN PETS

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Unfortunately, just as in humans, cancer is a common disease seen in older patients. Veterinary medicine has progressed immensely in the last 10 to 15 years regarding our ability to diagnose and treat cancer. There are many different types affecting many different body systems. Each has its own prognosis and response to treatment. We see cancer in the skin, lymph nodes, mouth, bones, lungs, urinary bladder, gastrointestinal tract, liver, and spleen. Today we will discuss how cancers involving the spleen or liver are usually discovered.

Many times, cancer of the spleen or liver go undiagnosed for long periods of time. Clinical symptoms are not commonly seen until it has become advanced or has spread. Instead, a bleeding event is frequently the first symptom. The liver and spleen have many blood vessels. When a tumor grows in one of these organs, it can rupture or break open. This bleeding event can be mild, resulting in lethargy. It can also be severe, leading to death. A sudden fast breathing rate, pale gums, and inability or unwillingness to stand are signs of a severe bleed. This is an emergency that requires immediate medical attention.

When this happens, an abdominal ultrasound is used to confirm that there is blood in the abdomen and identify where the tumor is located. If the bleed is life threatening, immediate surgery with a possible blood transfusion is needed. Tumors on the spleen can usually be removed, since removing the entire spleen is possible. Liver tumors are more difficult to address, since only certain portions of the liver can be removed. The tumor will be sent off to the lab to determine what type of cancer it is and whether it is benign or malignant. This determines the likelihood the cancer has already spread or will return, and whether additional treatments (chemotherapy) are recommended.

Routine physical exams are limited on what can be palpated in the abdomen. If bloodwork is run routinely, sometimes elevations in liver values or other changes can be a clue. Survey radiographs (x-rays) of the abdomen can also spot a tumor. This is why we have started to offer a senior package to patients over 7 years of age. This senior package includes a comprehensive bloodwork panel and radiographs of the chest and abdomen. The purpose of this testing is to try and discover cancer or other diseases before they become a life-threatening emergency.

