

As many of you who are regular readers of this column realize, we sometimes deal with companions outside of the canine or feline variety, and today is one of those times.

Stanley is a ten-year-old carpet python that has lived in a cage in Jonathan's house since he was first born. He eats once every two weeks, usually one adult rat and has had no health problems until recently.

About three months ago, Jonathan started to see a small mass developing on the right side of Stanley's body very close to his vent. It has continued to grow since then to the point now where it is about two inches long and three quarters of an inch wide. Stanley does not seem overly distressed by the mass although I must admit it can be a challenge to determine when your snake is showing distress. The mass does seem to compromise his motion a bit and Jonathan is concerned that the mass may soon compromise Stanley's ability to pass urates and stool. It has become obvious that something needs to be done and Jonathan is looking for some guidance.

I can say first off that it is highly unlikely that Stanley's tumor is going to disappear on its own. In fact, I can say with nearly 100 percent certainty that growths almost never disappear on their own no matter what type of creature they may be growing on. There are exceptions to this, hence the hedging noted above, but generally speaking, don't count on masses suddenly vanishing from your companion.

Jonathan needs to take Stanley to a veterinarian comfortable and capable of working with reptiles for a thorough evaluation of his condition followed by a recommended course of treatment. In my mind, from the information given in Jonathan's e-mail, I see surgery as the likely best option for eliminating Stanley's tumor.

Pre-surgically I would advise a fine needle aspirate of the mass be done. This is a simple procedure involving introducing a needle into the mass and aspirating back some cells to be placed on a slide and read out microscopically by a clinical pathologist. This can be an important diagnostic step as it often times allows diagnosis of what type of tumor we are dealing with, thus guiding the surgeon as to what type of surgical borders need to be achieved to entirely remove the tumor. Generally, the more malignant the tumor the bigger need be the borders achieved at surgery to clear the tumor. It is important to understand that a fine needle aspirate is not a needle biopsy. It simply allows examination of cell types. A biopsy allows for microscopic examination of tissue structure as well as cell types and generally provides more information as to the tumor's likely consequences.

Surgery in a snake, as in any animal, generally requires anesthesia. This allows the surgeon to work on his or her patient without the patient trying to leave the building. Anesthesia allows for pain relief and follow-up treatment post surgically allows the patient to stay free of pain. Anesthesia in a snake requires techniques that do differ a bit from those used in our mammal patients but when done appropriately, it works very well for its purpose.

Before the surgery, Stanley would likely need a radiograph to try to help determine the extent of the mass on the inside of his body. This along with the

information achieved with the fine needle aspirate, will help dictate the surgical approach and necessary technique to, if possible, eliminate the mass.

Once the tumor is removed, it will need to be biopsied. This involves sending the mass to a pathologist who is familiar with reptile pathology. He or she will then determine what type of tumor was growing on Stanley which in turn allows us to determine what might happen to Stanley in the future. It is almost not worth doing a surgery to remove a mass if we do not find out what type of mass we are dealing with, for without it we have no prognostic ability. Certainly, there are cases when a biopsy may not be possible, but it can be a very important diagnostic tool.

Snakes generally do very well with surgery and are wonderful healers. It takes them a little longer to heal as is the case with most things in reptiles, however they do heal well and hopefully, in Stanley's case, his mass removal surgery will be curative.