

Terry has received some bad news about his dog Brodie. Brodie has been diagnosed with lymphoma. About two weeks ago Terry was playing with Brodie and rough housing with him around his head. Terry felt two masses under Brodie's neck and immediately scheduled an appointment for Brodie to see his veterinarian.

At the veterinary hospital, Brodie was examined and found to have multiple masses. There were the two discovered by Terry as well as one in front of each shoulder, one under each lower jaw, one on either side of the inside of each rear leg and one behind each knee. A presumptive diagnosis of lymphoma was given and a blood panel and needle aspirate of several of the masses were taken to definitively diagnose the disease. The assumption proved correct: Brodie has lymphoma.

Lymphoma is a cancer of the lymph system which can manifest anywhere in the body where the lymph system occurs. The lymph system is part of the circulatory system and carries cells in it called lymphocytes which are part of the immune system. With lymphoma, the lymphocytes become malignant (cancerous) and displace the normal lymphocytes in various locations within the body. In Brodie's case, his lymphoma has manifested in his peripheral lymph nodes. These nodes are being taken over by malignant lymphocytes that are reproducing at a rapid and unchecked rate. Left alone, this process is fatal.

Terry has been presented by his veterinarian with a few options for Brodie's care, including referral to an oncologist for treatment for Brodie's disease. His dilemma is whether or not to put Brodie through treatment for his cancer.

Lymphoma is one of the more common types of cancer that we as veterinarians see in our canine patients. It is also the cancer that we have the most experience in treating. The goal with treatment for lymphoma is to put the cancer into remission using a course of medical therapy designed to kill the cancer cells at various stages of their reproductive cycles. Multiple drug therapy is the most effective, and in some cases, this disease can be cured. There are potential side effects from these treatments and the patients need to be monitored carefully, especially paying attention to their white blood cell counts as some of the drugs can cause a drop in neutrophils, one of the types of white blood cells needed to fight bacterial infections. In my experience treating lymphoma in my canine patients, therapy is generally very well tolerated. Almost all the patients show a positive response to treatment manifested by the disappearance of the enlarged lymph nodes, usually within the first 24 to 48 hours.

Terry and anyone out there with a canine companion facing this decision to treat or not to treat their dog for lymphoma, I would encourage you to strongly consider treatment. Sometimes patients with lymphoma can benefit from staging of the disease. This involves finding out where within the body the lymphoma is occurring. The results of staging can provide specificity in treatment as well as prognostic information for the possible outcome with therapy, thus helping in making the decision whether or not to treat.

Treatment for lymphoma can be very rewarding in providing the patient with an extended quality of life and, as I mentioned above, there are cases when the patient is cured. Let's hope that will be the case for Brodie.