

Feline Gastrointestinal Lymphoma An Overview

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General Information:

- Lymphoma is the most common feline neoplasm accounting for one-third of all malignancies
- Recent studies indicate the gastrointestinal (also known as alimentary) form is the most common anatomical site in the cat affected by lymphoma.
- Unlike other forms of feline lymphoma, the gastrointestinal form is less likely to be associated with feline leukemia virus infection (only 30% are FeLV positive)
- Two categories of gastrointestinal (“GI”) lymphoma (“LSA”) are recognized: the diffuse (multifocal) and solitary types.
- Two histologic types of feline GI LSA are small cell and large cell type.
- Treatment of gastrointestinal lymphoma may require surgery (to remove a solitary mass) combined with chemotherapy. The diffuse form is treated with chemotherapy only.
- General prognostic indicators of outcome include stage, cell type and initial response to chemotherapy.

What are the common clinical signs associated with GI lymphoma in cats?

Middle age to older cats tend to be more commonly affected with this disease. Vomiting, anorexia and weight loss are the most common clinical signs associated with gastrointestinal cancer in cats. Diarrhea, straining to defecate, blood tinged stool or vomit are less common clinical signs. Mild clinical signs may be noted for months until severe signs necessitate examination and evaluation. Treatment with medications such as prednisone can alleviate clinical signs early in the course of the disease. Although this treatment is beneficial to the patient, the determination of a definitive diagnosis may be delayed.

How is gastrointestinal lymphoma diagnosed?

A thorough physical examination is critical in the evaluation of the feline patient suspected of lymphoma. This exam will often determine which methods are used to confirm the diagnosis. Often, a complete blood count, platelet count, biochemistry profile, urinalysis and radiographs are performed. Other tests which may be performed include abdominal ultrasound with fine needle aspiration cytology or biopsy, endoscopy with biopsy or abdominal exploratory surgery with biopsies.

Abdominal ultrasound can evaluate the integrity of the stomach, intestines and lymph nodes and facilitate sampling of abnormal tissue. Endoscopy is another less invasive procedure to evaluate the inside lining of the stomach and proximal small intestine. Biopsies of these mucosal linings can be performed to confirm the diagnosis. General anesthesia is required for this procedure. Exploratory surgery not only allows for biopsy of lesions, but removal of tumors which may be obstructing the gastrointestinal tract can be performed.

Is supportive care required before initiating chemotherapy?

Cats that are protein-deficient, have low red cell counts due to gastrointestinal blood loss and have significant weight loss may require supportive measures prior to initiating chemotherapy. Administration of plasma or blood, fluid therapy or placement of feeding tubes may be recommended for these patients. In general, the more advanced the cancer at the time of diagnosis, the less likely we are able to control its devastating effects.

What is the prognosis for gastrointestinal lymphoma with treatment?

Solitary gastrointestinal forms of lymphoma may carry a better prognosis than the diffuse forms. Surgical excision of solitary masses may enhance survival times; follow-up chemotherapy is warranted in these patients.

Feline gastrointestinal lymphoma is more responsive to chemotherapeutic agents than other gastrointestinal tumors. These agents are administered in either an oral or injectable form at specific prescribed times. Such a group of treatments is called a “chemotherapy protocol”. One study using a combination of such agents for “Large cell” feline alimentary lymphoma reported a median remission of 5 months in 95% of cats treated. The overall survival of these patients was 9 months. In general, the severity and extent of the cancer affect the duration of remission when initially diagnosed.

More recent studies have confirmed that “Small Cell” gastrointestinal lymphoma responds very well to oral chemotherapy. The most common oral drugs utilized include Leukeran (chlorambucil), prednisone and also CCNU (lomustine). It is not uncommon to expect that cats can achieve remission times of at least 1-2 years. The oral therapy needs to be administered for lifelong, but is generally well tolerated.

How do cats respond to chemotherapy?

Most cats tolerate chemotherapy very well. As lymphoma is not curable, our emphasis is placed upon this enhanced quality of life while undergoing therapy. Acceptable side effects which may be noted in cats (receiving injectable therapy) include loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea and listlessness for 1-2 days following treatment. These effects are fortunately self-limiting. Occasionally a dosage reduction of chemotherapy agents or medication may be required to reduce the likelihood of these effects if they persist or are more severe in nature.

There are a few feline patients which do not tolerate oral chemotherapy agents well. In these cases, we can adjust the protocol accordingly. A small percentage of patients do not tolerate chemotherapy treatments at all. Persistent severe vomiting, diarrhea, low cell counts and poor quality of life necessitate discontinuation of therapy and allowing the lymphoma to follow its natural course.

Why do we treat cats with lymphoma?

Our feline pets are an integral part of our lives and our family. The decision to pursue therapy for a malignancy in a beloved pet is a difficult one. The emotional concerns, financial obligations and time invested are important factors to consider. Our objective is to extend the pet's life with good quality time. Both the pet and all members of the family should enjoy this extra time.

What is the cost of treatment?

We will review the costs of all diagnostic tests indicated to determine the type and extent of the cancer. All options for treatment will be discussed, as well as the costs associated with them. Please do not hesitate to ask questions and review our discussions when you feel the need to do so.

Is this contagious to other cats?

Lymphoma is not contagious to other cats or humans. However, if the patient is FeLV positive, other cats in the household should be tested for this viral infection.