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Alternatively Speaking: A Holistic Approach to Treating Cancer Dr. Anne Carroll, DVM, CVA

Your pet has not been feeling well and after an extensive workup your veterinarian comes back with a diagnosis of cancer. Your heart just sinks into your chest and this confusing flood of emotions overtakes you. It is probably the one thing you weren't prepared to hear.

Cancer is not a new problem in pets, but just like in people, it feels like we see more of it now than in the past. Modern research helps us understand that cancer occurs when a body is damaged on a cellular level. Cancer cells ignore their original programming and grow unchecked, multiplying more than intended, living longer than they should, and spreading to tissues where they don't belong. They are no longer playing a positive role in support of the body. Instead they now function to support themselves, ultimately causing the death of their host.

Western medicine utilizes chemotherapy and radiation to try to kill cancer cells, often with good results. But it is hard to poison the cancer without poisoning the patient. So modern medicine still struggles to win against this disease. More recent breakthroughs have developed "vaccines" that prime a dog's immune system to fight a cancer directly. What is exciting about this line of thinking is that it taps into the idea that our bodies themselves can defeat cancers given the proper tools and direction. This notion fits very well with many of the alternative approaches to dealing with cancer.

Cancer cells require a lot of support to take hold and spread. This support can come in the form of increased blood supply to provide nutrients and oxygen. Instead of highly toxic therapies, alternative practitioners use relatively weak and safe substances that interfere with cancer's ability to obtain those resources. To borrow an analogy from one of my colleagues, you can think of alternative therapies working against cancer like the American militia did against the enemy in the Revolutionary war. Not strong enough to meet the superiorly armed and trained British troops head on, these rebels eroded their flanks, blocked roads and bridges impairing their ability to move, and deprived them of resources by cutting off supply lines. This approach effectively paralyzed them into a 'stasis' where all they could do is hunker down and wait for help. In alternative medicine there are a wealth of compounds and nutritional supplements that work exactly like

this. Any one of them is too weak to impact a cancer's growth alone but when prescribed in the right combination to target a specific cancer's needs, we can make it far harder for the cancer to thrive and without toxic effects to the body in the process. Taking a holistic approach, we can simultaneously strengthen the immune system to fight more effectively so our efforts may be even more successful.

Alternative veterinarians have many cancer fighting tools to choose from. Using Chinese acupuncture and herbal medicine, we can look at patterns of circulation and try to direct blood flow towards some cancers that would prefer to stay hidden from the immune system, or deprive blood from other aggressive cancers that need that support to grow fast and invade surrounding tissues. Nutrition can be used to feed the body while starving the cancer as well as to reduce inflammation that can fuel a cancer. Homeopathy can help direct the body to move against a cancer or find balance and allow a body's normal defenses to once again work effectively. All of these approaches can be used in conjunction with Western care, such as radiation and chemotherapy, to help minimize side effects and improve their effectiveness.

Certainly cancers can move fast and not all cases will have the time to respond to either traditional or alternative therapy. As with any illness, it is most helpful to start treatment early. Consult with an alternative practitioner and consider having them work in conjunction with your traditional veterinarian or oncologist to provide the best possible care for your pet. A foundation to this approach may include specific nutrition, promoting a healthy balanced blood circulation, and removing sources of chronic inflammation. In my practice this foundational work begins early when the patient is healthy and young so their body is armed with the protection it needs as it moves through middle and senior years. So while it is wonderful to incorporate alternative supports early in a fight against cancer, it is even better to start early enough that perhaps the cancer won't occur at all.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseaanimalhospital.com