

Cancer And Goldens

By Sue Jordan

With the Help of The Golden Retriever News, Delaware Valley Golden Retriever Rescue, The Land of Pure Gold Foundation, and the Morris Animal Foundation

I remember when my grandfather was diagnosed with cancer. It was almost 40 years ago and back then, the Big C was talked about in whispers. You didn't come right out and say a family member had cancer. In fact, many times a doctor would withhold the information from the patient. Of course, you never associated this terrible illness with the family pet.

Today, cancer in humans is something that no longer carries an automatic death sentence. Early detection can often lead to a complete cure. It's no different with our pets. If you are aware of how this disease can appear in animals and what symptoms to look for, your pet will have a better chance at overcoming the cancer.

Let's start with some data on how cancer affects Golden Retrievers. Approximately 60% of all Goldens will die from cancer. By gender, it's 57% of females and 66% of males. For comparison, the rate of cancer in Goldens is just slightly less than double the rate of cancer in all dogs, which is estimated at one in three. (This is just about the same in humans.) This is scary stuff, but before you envision your Golden stepping over the Rainbow Bridge in the near future, it's important to keep in mind that the life span of Goldens *is still the same as all larger breeds*. (10 to 13 years). Also remember, cancer is a fact of life. It affects essentially all animals, and any animal that has passed its normal reproductive life is at increased risk of cancer.

Next, here is some basic cancer terminology. Hopefully, this information will help you be better prepared should you ever need to have this discussion with your Vet. First of all, cancer is not a single disease, but rather many diseases that share certain characteristics. The predominant characteristics are that cancers contain cells that do not stop multiplying when they are supposed to, and cells that don't die when they are supposed to.

The type of cell they originated from can identify different types of cancers. For example, hemangiosarcomas arise in the endothelial cells, the kind of cells that line blood vessels. Lymphoma comes from cells in the lymph system.

The two most common cancers for Goldens are hemangiosarcoma, affecting one in five Goldens and lymphoma, affecting about one in eight Goldens. Typically, hemangiosarcoma tumors form in vascular organs such as the spleen, liver, right atrium of the heart, and the lungs, but can also develop in the brain and skin as well. However, *no matter where the primary tumor is found*, it is not "spleen cancer" or "lung cancer" *if the tumor cells are endothelial cells*. Unfortunately, some vets will use incorrect terminology with pet owners, which can cause misunderstanding and confusion about the cancer and potential treatment. Because accuracy in diagnosis is the beginning of any progress against cancer, it is so important for owners to request pathology to correctly identify the type of cancer, not just the location of the tumor.

The good news is that in the near future the diagnostic challenge this disease can present is going to change for the better. One of the researchers supported by GRCA (Golden Retriever Club of America) and GRF (Golden Retriever Foundation) has developed a blood test to diagnose hemangiosarcoma. This test should be available to your vets very soon and will be a welcome advance, sparing many dogs from having to undergo a surgical procedure to diagnose the disease.

According to the National Canine Cancer Foundation, the 10 early warning signs of cancer are: abnormal swelling that persist or continue to grow, sores that do not heal; weight loss; loss of appetite; bleeding or discharge from any body opening; offensive odor; difficulty eating or swallowing, hesitation to exercise or loss of stamina; persistent lameness or stiffness; and difficulty breathing, urinating, or defecation.

So, what happens after your pet is diagnosed with cancer? What can you do? How should you react? Fortunately, there are a number of wonderful organizations that have set up websites to answer these questions, and so many more. To start, check out the website set up by the Land of Pure Gold Foundation. It is dedicated to treating and finding cures for the cancer affecting the Golden Retriever Breed. It is called landofpuregold.com. It gives great advise on what to do when faced with cancer in your beloved companion. Another great organization is the Morris Animal Foundation. This foundation has recently set up a new canine cancer campaign website called CureCanineCancer.org. The campaign theme is "Best Friends Helping Best Friends". Here you can read case histories and canine survivor stories that chronicle how innovative treatments developed for the benefit of dogs are also benefiting human cancer patients. Another great source of information is The National Canine Cancer Foundation. Their website is wearethecure.org. Take a few minutes and browse these websites. You'll be glad you did.

If you would like to see more articles on canine cancer, or have an article to contribute, please contact me (Sue Jordan) at info@azgrc.org.