

Be Alert for Signs of Cancer in Cat

VPI seeks to raise awareness about the disease throughout November.

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Veterinary Pet Insurance (VPI), to encourage better awareness of pet cancer, sponsors Pet Cancer Awareness Month throughout November. "Cancer is the leading cause of disease-related death in pets," said Dr. Carol McConnell of VPI, based in Brea, Calif. "Roughly one in four pets will be diagnosed with the disease at some point in their lives."

Cancer can be particularly devastating to cats, who often hide symptoms of their illnesses until it's too late to treat the disease. Cats also are more difficult to diagnose than dogs, according to Mona P. Rosenberg, DVM, chief of staff at Veterinary Cancer Group in Los Angeles and Tustin, Calif.

Common types of cancers in pets include mammary gland or breast cancer; head and neck tumors, including those in the mouth and nose; lymphoma, characterized by enlargement of one or many lymph nodes in the animal's body; abdominal tumors; and bone tumors. Cancer accounts for almost half the deaths of pets over 10 years of age, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Fortunately, cat owners can look for symptoms that will help them catch cancer early. Rosenberg recommended the following: "Be aware of what's normal for your pet," she said. As an example, she said a cat that vomits a hairball once a week all its life may not raise concern, but if the frequency increases, there may be a problem. Look for lumps or bumps that persist longer than a week. Cancers in pets often manifest themselves as neoplasms, or abnormal growths on the animal's body. Be aware of any offensive odors, especially from your cat's mouth, nose or ears. Look for any difficulty breathing, urinating or defecating; pay attention if your cat has difficulty eating or swallowing, too. Take notice if your cat starts losing weight, drinking more water than normal or has a wound that won't heal.

Have your cat examined by a veterinarian if it shows any of these symptoms. "Don't put your head in the sand," Rosenberg said. "Visiting your general practitioner vet is the best line of defense to have those things checked."