Feline Ear Tumors

Ear tumors are relatively rare. In cats, the most common ear tumor is a ceruminous gland adenocarcinoma. These patients usually act as though they have an ear infection. Signs include head shaking, discharge from the ear, pain, smell, and itchiness. These tumors most often arise in middle-aged to older cats.

Staging diagnostics performed to “work up” a patient include blood work, urinalysis, 3-view chest radiographs (x-rays), Computed tomography (CT scan), and cytology of the draining lymph nodes. A biopsy is performed to obtain a definite diagnosis and to assess the grade of the tumor, which can be used as a general predictor of tumor behavior.

Two important factors are whether the cancer has already spread at diagnosis and whether a surgeon can achieve a complete surgical removal of the cancer. Surgery is the best treatment. The more thorough the surgery, the better the outcome; therefore, we recommend (1) a CT scan prior to surgery to better delineate the tumor margins and (2) a board-certified surgeon, simply because board certification generally ensures more experience with involved surgeries.

Patients treated with more extensive, thorough surgery enjoyed, on average, a 42-month period with no tumor recurrence. They experienced an overall 25% recurrence rate. Patients treated with less aggressive surgery had only a 10-month period free from tumor. In these patients, 67% of tumors returned. The one-year survival rate was only 33%.

In cases where tumor cannot be completely removed with surgery, radiation can also be used to prevent tumor recurrence. When surgery was followed with radiation, the interval between treatment and the time to recurrence of clinical signs was 40 months, and at least 55% of cats survived one year.

As for medical treatment (chemotherapy), it is best to treat a primary tumor with surgery and/or radiation and follow-up with chemotherapy. For patients who cannot undergo these procedures, chemotherapy can be used for palliation to make a tumor shrink for a while to alleviate signs for a time. Chemotherapy is also used for patients with existing spread of disease at diagnosis or for those who have tumors with unfavorable qualities associated (high tumor grade, spread to lymph nodes, etc.). Recommendations are best made by a board-certified veterinary oncologist.

Beth Overley VMD, DACVIM (oncology)