Feline Mammary Gland Tumors

Feline mammary gland tumors (MGT) are the 3rd most commonly diagnosed tumor in cats. In general, cats spayed later in life (past one year of age) have an increased risk for developing these tumors, and they form most often in middle aged to older female cats.

Most tumors in the feline mammary glands are malignant. Adenocarcinomas are most common. They may be discovered as incidental findings by the owner, the groomer, or the veterinarian on routine examination. When one is found, it’s always good to check the other glands and the draining lymph nodes.

Once a tumor is noted, a biopsy should be performed to determine the tumor type. With biopsy, a tissue sample is taken during surgery and submitted to a pathologist for evaluation and diagnosis. There are different malignant tumor types which can behave differently, and there are particular features which provide clues as to how aggressively the tumor might behave, so this is important.

With malignant mammary tumors, staging is also important for making good treatment decisions. With staging, a series of diagnostics is performed to assess overall health, look for co-morbid states, and check for the presence of disease in other organs. Tests involved include blood work (complete blood count, serum chemistry analysis), urinalysis, 3-view chest radiographs (x-rays), lymph node evaluation, and possible ultrasound.

Treatment recommendations depend on many factors, including the health of the patient and tumor size, stage, and grade. Treatment recommendations may include surgery alone or surgery plus additional treatments such as chemotherapy. In general, more radical surgery (removal of the entire mammary chain or all mammary tissue) is recommended as this can improve tumor-free survival. If the tumor is already well advanced at diagnosis, however, palliative treatments may be recommended instead to keep the patient comfortable for as long as possible.

Chemotherapy after surgery depends on many factors. A board-certified veterinary oncologist is the best person to consult to determine whether there is a need and to set up the appropriate treatment protocol. In general, most treatment protocols involve the use of either Adriamycin or Carboplatin given for 4-5 cycles once every 3 weeks. The hope with chemotherapy treatment is to slow or stop growth of tumors in other organs where the
tumor may have already “seeded.”

Expected outcome depends on a variety of variables. However, many cats do very well when treated appropriately. In general, the following are considerations:

Size of tumor is very important. Tumors with diameters less than 3 cm have median survival times of two years or greater even with surgery alone. Surgery type is important as more conservative surgeries often result in the need for second surgeries when the tumor recurs. Staging is important. Tumors which have spread to the lymph nodes, lungs, or other sites bear a more guarded prognosis. They may also require additional treatment.

Overall, early detection and appropriate treatment are the most important factors.

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