

## Ask A Vet: Mast Cell Tumors can be a Ticking Time Bomb for Your Dog

*Sunday, September 1, 2013*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog has a small lump on his side that has come up rather quickly. It doesn't seem to be painful and is confined to his skin. Should I be concerned?

Dear Reader,

Skin masses or tumors in dogs are rather common, and while they are considered benign about seventy five percent of the time, they should be taken very seriously. It is extremely important to have your veterinarian check these lumps or masses when you notice them. He or she should be able to discern if any further action is necessary.

One of the most common skin tumors considered harmful is the mast cell tumor (MCT). They make up about fifteen percent of all skin tumors found on the dog. They are most commonly found on the trunk and limbs, but can be found on any skinned surface. Boxers, Bulldogs, Boston Terriers, Golden Retrievers, and Labradors are commonly affected but these tumors can occur in any breed. Middle to older aged dogs are usually affected, but dogs of any age can get MCTs. Unfortunately, about 50% of these tumors can exhibit malignant or dangerous qualities.

By this I mean up to half of these tumors will aggressively spread to nearby tissues, lymph nodes, and occasionally even to major organs like the liver or spleen.

MCTs are typically diagnosed by examination and a procedure called a fine needle aspirate. Because they vary so much in size, shape, and appearance, this is the best way to verify the condition. In this case the veterinarian uses a small needle and syringe to extract a few cells from the mass. He or she can then stain and examine the cells using a microscope to determine if they have characteristics of a MCT.

Surgical removal is typically the treatment of choice for these tumors.

Success rate is often determined by how aggressive the particular tumor may be. A special scale has been created to measure the relative danger. It is often helpful to have the tumor sent off to be identified and graded by a veterinary pathologist so proper aftercare and precautions can be made. In some cases of high grade MCTs chemotherapy or radiation may be implemented with or without surgical removal.

The bottom line is that if you find a mass or lump on your pet's skin, no matter how small or seemingly innocent, please have it checked by your veterinarian. It could save your pet's life.

-Dr. Justin Sellon