Brain Tumors in Cats

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

Signs & Symptoms

Initial Symptoms

- Vomiting, drooling
- Reclusive behavior
- Weight loss
- Gain or loss of appetite
- Sudden collapse
- Bumping into walls
- Standing in the corner
- Urinating/defecating outside of box

Intermediate Symptoms

- Depression
- Head tilt, loss of balance
- Decreased or loss of vision
- Difficulty swallowing
- Voice changes
- Seizures
- Increased/decreased thirst
- Increased behavior at night

Advanced Symptoms

- Abnormal aggression
- Increased sleeping
- Dull mentation/stupor
- Needy behavior
- Circling or hugging the walls
- Shaking, trembling
- Drooping eyelids, lips
- Dropping food

Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Difficulty breathing
- Sudden collapse
- Seizures
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Yowling in pain
- Uncontrollable behavior

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What Is It?

A brain tumor describes a cancerous mass within the cavity of the skull associated with the brain. Brain cancer is common in older cats, accounting for approximately 2-3% of all feline tumors, though emerging research shows that brain tumors are found among younger animals as well. Brain tumors are either primary (arising from the brain or brain lining) or secondary (caused by the spread of cancer). The most common forms of primary brain tumors in cats include meningiomas, gliomas, choroid papillomas, pituitary adenomas and adenocarcinomas. Meningiomas are the most common primary feline brain tumor, estimated to represent 75% of all feline brain tumors. Male domestic short hair cats are over-represented. Meningiomas arise from the lining of the brain rather than the brain itself. Secondary tumors result from the spread of cancer from somewhere else in the body to the brain. Examples of secondary brain tumors include hemangiosarcoma, mammary carcinoma, and melanoma. Secondary tumors carry a guarded prognosis as metastasis (spread) within the body is present at the time of diagnosis indicating that the cancer is likely advanced and/or aggressive. Depending on the location of the tumor, the symptoms will vary. For example, tumors that affect the brainstem typically impair the ability to walk, respiratory function, circulation, mentation, balance and nerve function to the face and mouth while tumors of the forebrain typically cause seizures as well as mentation or behavior changes.

Diagnosis

A diagnosis is determined by a complete medical workup and detailed physical exam. Typically, brain tumors are undetectable on x-rays and blood work. The brain can be imaged using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or computed tomographic (CT) scans. The following diagnostic steps are recommended as a general workup: complete physical and neurological examination, routine blood work to rule out other problems, chest x-rays to check for the spread of cancer to the lungs, abdominal ultrasound to check for the spread of cancer to internal organs, and CT or an MRI of the brain. In general, an MRI and CT scan are the best choices to definitively identify brain tumors. However, advanced imaging diagnostics generally require anesthesia and are expensive, available only at specialty facilities.

Treatment and Management

Treatment options for brain tumors include surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. If none of the above therapies are an option, it is still possible to treat the symptoms with palliative care. A cat with a brain tumor that has seizures can be placed on anti-epileptic drugs such as Phenobarbital. Tumors that tend to cause fluid to accumulate around them can respond to palliative treatment with steroids, such as prednisone, which has the potential to improve the quality of your pet's life for a period of time. Supporting healthy brain function with cognitive supplements and diets has proven helpful for some pets as well.

Prognosis

It is important to note that most brain tumors are treatable, but not curable. The mean survival time for pets with untreated brain tumors is relatively short, and even with radiation therapy, survival times may only reach around a year on average. In cats, meningiomas may have a good prognosis with surgery followed

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by radiation; some felines have been reported surviving two years or more with good quality of life. Untreated brain tumors, or those that are particularly aggressive, will result in progressive disease with worsening symptoms. In general, the more severe the signs and the larger the tumor, the worse the outcome. It is important to discuss a personalized treatment and management plan with your veterinarian and veterinary oncologist to provide the best outcome for your cat.

Management Tips

Consider providing:

- Easily accessible food and water
- Ramps/stairs to common areas
- Access to safe, quiet areas
- Warm, soft sleeping areas
- Modified surfaces to increase traction
- Natural, safe, calming products
- Cognitive function supplements
- Prescription diets promoting brain function
- Night lights

Try to:

- Be consistent with medications
- Block off stairs and other areas of potential hazard
- Limit strenuous activity/rough play
- Track weight, appetite, energy level, etc.
- Track good days vs. bad days
- Limit stress (kids, people, noise)
- Keep separate from other animals to avoid altercations and injuries
- Be cautious with handling
- Approach slowly, do not startle
- Avoid sudden movements, lights, sounds

Before your cat's condition becomes unmanageable it is important to begin palliative care discussions with your veterinarian. Maintaining normal functions such as eating, drinking, urinating, and defecating does NOT mean your pet is pain-free. Discuss providing palliative medications for pain regardless of "normal" body functions.

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