

How I Treat Canine Lumps and Bumps

Lumps and bumps fall into the top 10 list of reasons pet parents take their dogs to the veterinarian. When do skin growths warrant a closer look by your vet, and is there any way to prevent them? Here's how I diagnose and treat canine lumps and bumps, including my top two rules.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Lumps and bumps are very common in dogs, especially seniors; these growths typically fall into one of four broad categories
- Most growths are benign, however, if you notice a lump or bump on your pet that is changing in size or appearance, it's important to make an appointment with your veterinarian; lumps and bumps are diagnosed via fine needle aspiration, biopsy, fluid cytology, and blood tests
- A fine needle aspirate is almost always my choice, because we can't know what's going on inside a mass unless we extract cells from it for analysis; my approach is to perform fine need aspiration on all suspicious growths to determine what types of cells are involved and whether surgery is warranted
- My policy is to remove only cancerous growths and those that are compromising a pet's mobility or quality of life
- There are steps you can take as a pet parent to help your dog avoid skin growths throughout life

Lumps and bumps on dogs are quite common, and fall into three general categories:¹

1. **Lumps of the skin, the lining or the surface of organs, or the glands** — Examples include papillomas (warts) and adenomas, which are benign, and carcinomas, which are malignant (meaning they can spread — metastasize — to other areas of the body).
2. **Lumps of the deeper tissues, such as fat, muscle, bone, blood vessels, and nerves** — Examples include lipomas and hemangiomas, which are benign, and sarcomas, which are malignant.
3. **Lumps of cell types found in the blood and lymph nodes** — Examples include histiocytomas, which are benign, and lymphoma and mast cell tumors, which are malignant.

The most commonly seen non-malignant lumps and bumps that show up in dogs are lipomas, sebaceous gland hyperplasia, histiocytomas, and papillomas; mast cell tumors are the most common malignancies.

When to Call Your Veterinarian

Lumps and bumps on dogs are typically harmless, though they can be unsettling and ugly. And as I mentioned earlier, they are extremely common, and in fact, each year they appear in the top 10 list of reasons pet parents take their dogs — especially seniors — to the veterinarian.

It's important, as your pet's body changes with age, to have new lumps and bumps evaluated by your veterinarian. It's rare that a growth requires emergency action, however, occasionally a mass like an abscess or cyst may require urgent care.

If your pet is obviously uncomfortable or you know the mass is growing or changing, you'll want to make an appointment with your vet, preferably within 24 hours. But rarely is it necessary to visit an emergency animal hospital or make an emergency appointment because of a lump or bump.

My recommendation when you find a growth is to monitor it. If it is growing or changing quickly, it's best to see a veterinarian sooner rather than later. If you notice, for example, a discoloration on the skin or what looks like a skin tag that doesn't get bigger or change over the course of days, weeks or months, then just mention it to your vet at your pet's next wellness exam.

But again, if the area is changing rapidly or your animal appears uncomfortable, you do need to have your pet seen as soon as possible.

How Lumps and Bumps Are Diagnosed

- **Fine-needle aspiration (FNA)** — This is the most common method for collecting a sample of cells. A needle attached to a syringe is inserted into the lump, and a sample is drawn. The cells in the sample are placed on a glass slide, stained, and examined under a microscope. FNA can be done quickly, usually without sedation or anesthesia, because the needle size is the same as those used to draw blood.
- **Biopsy** — There are different types of biopsies, depending on factors such as the size and location of the lump, the probable type of lump, and the pet's overall health. Biopsies can involve removing just a small piece of the lump, or at the other end of the spectrum, the entire lump (called an excisional biopsy).

Extracted tissues are usually sent to a lab for analysis, but your veterinarian may create an imprint or a scraping of cells from the biopsy to examine prior to preserving the larger sample.

- **Fluid cytology** — This procedure is most often used with fluid-filled lumps. Fluid is extracted and analyzed to see if there are any cells that indicate the type of lump.
- **Blood tests** — For some lumps, blood tests can show changes suggestive of a possible tumor, but a definitive diagnosis requires a biopsy.

The Importance of Fine Needle Aspiration for Skin Growths

The importance of the fine needle aspirate procedure can't be overstated. Your veterinarian doesn't know precisely what is going on inside that mass unless he or she extracts some cells from it and evaluates them. Another reason for a fine needle aspirate is there are some types of tumors that need to be excised very widely.

For example, mast cell tumors need to be surgically removed in most cases, and they need to be excised with a very wide margin (removing the tumor plus surrounding tissue). If a vet does a very small cosmetic cut to remove only the mass and it turns out to be mast cell cancer, fingers of tumor cells can be left behind to invade deeper tissue.

I always get a confirming diagnosis with a fine needle aspirate, so I know what surgical margins to take based on the type of tumor I'm dealing with. This is an extremely important aspect of tumor removal. Another reason for a fine needle aspirate is that some tumors require the expertise of a soft tissue surgeon.

My Approach to Treating Canine Lumps and Bumps

In many situations, removal is totally unnecessary because the masses are benign and there's nothing to worry about as long as they don't impinge on the pet's quality of life or longevity. As long as the mass isn't cancer and doesn't impede the animal's movement or quality of life, there's no reason other than aesthetics to remove it.

In my opinion, when it comes to removing benign growths, the expense and risks of anesthesia and surgery far outweigh the benefit of having a lump-free pet. My two rules for treating growths are:

1. If the fine needle aspirate shows there's something dangerous brewing, possibly cancer, then surgically removing the mass will give the pet the best chance to be cancer-free. So off to surgery we go.
2. If the fine needle aspirate shows the lump is benign, which means there are no abnormal cells and nothing to worry about, then I leave things alone.

I always mark down exactly where the mass is, the size, the date, and the results of the fine needle aspirate on the patient's body chart. Then I measure the mass and check for changes each time I see the pet at future appointments.

The only reason other than cancer that I recommend surgery for lumps or bumps is if the patient's quality of life is compromised. For example, skin tags that grow on the margins of a dog's or cat's eyes are entirely benign, but because they are on the eyelid, as the pet blinks it can cause corneal irritation and pain.

In a situation like that, even though the mass is not cancerous, if the surface of the eye is being affected, I do recommend surgical removal because it's causing the animal discomfort. Another example is warts on dogs. They can be very itchy, and a dog can spend the entire day licking and chewing the area. The pet parent returns home from work to find a big, open, bleeding wound on the dog.

The wart itself is benign and harmless, but the patient's quality of life is suffering because of the itching and self-wounding. This is another situation in which I would recommend removing the wart.

How to Help Pets Avoid Skin Growths as They Age

To give your pet the best chance to avoid both benign and malignant lumps and bumps throughout her life and especially as she gets older, it's important to keep her in good physical condition while also supporting her metabolism, immune and lymphatic systems, and organs of detoxification.

- Feed a nutritionally optimal, species-specific, fresh food diet, preferably organic and without GM ingredients. This is the type of diet that will generate the least amount of metabolic stress in your pet, provide needed moisture, and ensure the highest level of biologic assimilation and digestion.
- Provide your dog with fresh, filtered drinking water that doesn't contain fluoride, chlorine, heavy metals, or other contaminants.

- Be mindful of your pet's BMI (body mass index) and keep him at a healthy weight with portion-controlled meals and plenty of physical exercise.
- Make sure your pet is breathing clean, smoke- and fume-free air in your home. Replace chemical household cleaners with all-natural options.
- Consider periodic detoxification, since it's virtually impossible to protect your pet from all sources of toxins.
- Treat your pet to circulatory enhancing therapies such as massage and chiropractic treatments that assist in detoxification.
- Take care not to over-vaccinate or over-medicate your pet. This includes avoiding all unnecessary vaccines, veterinary drugs, and chemical flea/tick preventives.

Sources and References

¹ [PetMD, March 6, 2023](#)
