

Ferret Disease: Lymphosarcoma

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Lymphosarcoma (LSA) is a common cancer in ferrets. It is a deadly disease that is best treated when caught early in its course. Not only are older animals at risk for developing this disease, but younger ferrets also can be inflicted. The prognosis for this disease is poor - the best chance your ferret has is early detection. Your veterinarian looks for signs of this disease during the physical examination, and you can help your ferret if you know what to look for, too.

A serious difficulty in diagnosing lymphosarcoma early in its course is that your ferret may show no external signs of this disease until it has spread throughout the ferret's body. Your ferret may lose weight, become lethargic and may even lose its appetite. These may be the only signs that you see. Sometimes the lymph nodes are large. Large lymph nodes are felt behind the ferret's front legs, behind the knees and near the end of the belly.

Ferrets can develop LSA at any age. Lymphosarcoma has a sudden onset in young ferrets. This needs to be diagnosed quickly if there is to be any hope in treating this disease. Lymphosarcoma usually develops slower in older ferrets.

During the physical examination, your vet will palpate all the areas in which a large lymph node can be found. Also, the vet will feel for enlarged internal organs, including the liver, spleen and kidney. It is important to realize there are other reasons for an organ or lymph node to be enlarged. This is why your veterinarian recommends a series of tests to determine if lymphosarcoma is present.

One of the most important tests is the complete blood count. This measures the red and white blood cell count and the types of white blood cells that are present. Lymphosarcoma can cause a great elevation in the white blood cell count; however, infection also increases the white blood cell count. One key to determine if it is infection or cancer are the types of white blood cells that are elevated. If the lymphocyte count is elevated, it is a good chance that lymphosarcoma is present.

Your vet will probably perform a serum biochemistry panel and recommend diagnostic imaging. These include radiographs and a sonogram. A sonogram not only can confirm that the organ is enlarged but also can look at the internal structure of the organ. The internal structure is not normal if lymphosarcoma is present.

Another method used to determine if cancer is present is to take part of the tissue with a biopsy. This is easy to do with the lymph nodes. The ferret is anesthetized for a short time, a small incision is made over a lymph node, and a small wedge of tissue is removed.

If an internal organ is involved, your doctor may recommend exploratory abdominal surgery. This is major surgery and should be undertaken only as a last resort. With lymphosarcoma, the ferret's bone marrow may be affected. For this reason, your veterinarian may recommend that a sample be taken from the bone marrow. This is a simple procedure, but your ferret will need to be anesthetized.

Treatment for lymphosarcoma is chemotherapy. Before starting chemotherapy, your veterinarian needs to know how far the disease has spread. The more widespread the disease and the sicker your ferret, the less chance chemotherapy can help.

During the course of treatment, your veterinarian will repeat many blood tests to see if the treatment is destroying the cancer and to make sure the internal organs are not being damaged by the chemotherapy. The drugs used to treat lymphosarcoma are very strong and have the potential to do great damage to healthy organs, so your doctor must balance this strong treatment to kill cancer cells versus damaging healthy tissue.

The outlook is not very good for most ferrets with this disease, even when caught early. The prognosis appears worse for young ferrets. Older ferrets have a better prognosis, but treatment must start early and be aggressive.