

# Cut the risk of cancer in your cat

Emily Fowler looks at the third most common tumour type in female cats, available treatments and what signs owners should be aware of



**M**ammary tumours account for 17% of all cancers in female cats, and although the average age of cats that develop them is between ten and twelve years old, they can develop in cats as young as nine months old all the way up to elderly cats in their twenties. Feline mammary cancer results in tumours in the cat's mammary glands which are incredibly invasive and can spread quickly around the rest of the body and, while it's more common in female cats, in rare cases males can also develop mammary tumours and the disease is even more aggressive when this happens.

## Cats that are most at risk

As well as female cats in general, Siamese cats and domestic short haired cats show an increased risk of developing mammary tumours, as well as



cats with compromised immune systems such as FIV+ cats. Female cats who haven't been spayed are also more at risk and, as Elise Robertson, (BS BVetMed MACVSc (Feline) DipABVP (Feline) MRCVS), American Board Certified Specialist Feline Practice says: "Hormonal fluctuations associated with repeated seasons may influence the development of tumours in cats."

Studies have shown that cats that are spayed before they're one year old show a decreased risk of developing mammary tumours and in fact, cats that are spayed before the age of six months are a whopping 91% less likely to develop them. If that's not a case for getting your cats spayed as soon as your vet recommends it, I don't know what is!

Early diagnosis is so important when it comes to feline mam-

mary cancer. "This is an awful disease because it's usually detected relatively late in the disease process which worsens the overall prognosis, despite what you then do to treat it" said Elise. So, what should you be looking for as a cat owner?

## Symptoms

Signs of feline mammary cancer include swellings or lumps around your cat's mammary area or a change in shape, size or texture of nipples. The first sign of mammary cancer in our cat Looby was a change in one of her nipples. It became harder and started to twist slightly, and when she had exploratory surgery the vet discovered a malignant tumour underneath it. If the tumours aren't treated and removed early enough, the skin around the area can eventually become ulcerated, which will be unpleasant for both you and your cat.

## Treatment

The initial treatment is usually a lumpectomy to remove the tumour followed by a histological examination of the tumour to discover whether it's malignant (cancerous) or benign. The vet may decide to remove the entire mammary chain to try to stop further tumours developing in the remaining mammary tissue.

Looby had to have a further surgery six months after the initial tumour was removed, because she had developed another tumour, and this time her entire mammary chain was removed on one side. A radical mastectomy of this type is obviously a much more invasive surgery than a lumpectomy, so it's much harder on the cat and involves a longer recovery time. While chemotherapy is a possibility as part of an overall treatment plan, and may shrink tumours in



50% of cases, there haven't yet been any published studies that evaluate the true effectiveness of chemotherapy in cases of feline mammary cancer. Elise also advises that: "Other therapies such as radiation, immune therapy and hormone therapy have not been shown to improve survival times in cats with mammary carcinoma."

### Prognosis

If your cat develops mammary cancer, the prognosis depends on a number of factors including the size of the tumour, whether the cancer has spread to other areas and the extent of the initial surgery, meaning how much tissue was removed from the mammary chain. Sadly, because this type of cancer isn't usually detected until it's quite advanced, the average life expectancy of a cat with mammary cancer is only one year from the detection of a malignant tumour.

### Average survival time

Tumours less than 2cm in diameter – Over 3 years (female cats), 14 months (male cats)

Tumours 2-3cm in diameter – 2 years (female cats), 5 months (male cats)

Tumours over 3cm in diameter – 4-12 months (female cats), less than 2 months (male cats)

Because feline mammary cancer is so easy to miss, it's important to get into a routine of checking your female cat, as a woman would do herself. Elise recommends regular veterinary examinations that include a full physical exam, as well as cat owners making sure they know what 'normal' feels like on their cats, so that they're more likely to notice any abnormal lumps or changes as early as possible. "Unfortunately, by the time a cat is taken to the vet, most present with aggressive tumours at a very advanced stage and thus the overall long term prognosis is worsened."

We were lucky that Looby loved tummy rubs, so we were in the position to notice something suspicious quite early on and the cancer was caught while it was still in a fairly early stage, which meant that we were able to have longer with her than the average survival time would suggest. Unfortunately her cancer eventually spread to her lymph nodes and started to cause problems for her and affect her quality of life, so we had to make the kindest decision for her.

If you do find anything suspicious, no matter how small, make an appointment with your vet to get it checked out. 🐾

## Beautiful Bella, the kebab stick cat



As warmer weather approaches and we dust off our barbecues, please make sure you clear up absolutely everything after use

Cats Protection's Birmingham Adoption Centre has ensured that a young female cat has eight of her 'nine lives' still intact after a routine spay procedure uncovered an amazing discovery.

"Little Bella came in to the charity as a stray at the beginning of the month," said Bryan Cross, who works full time as a Cat Care Assistant at the centre. "She is a fairly young cat, around 18 months old. She is black and white and very beautiful. As with all cats that come to us, we booked her in with our veterinarian to be vaccinated and spayed."

However, whilst Bella was under anaesthetic, the vet noticed an unusual object in Bella's stomach. Upon further examination, and the decision to explore with further surgery, a very sharp, flexible stick - three inches long - was discovered to be lodged in her colon.

The vet stated that if the stick, thought to be from a kebab, had encroached much further down Bella's intestines, then the consequences would surely have been fatal. "So Bella had a very lucky escape - if we had not opened her up, we never would have found such a potential threat to her life," added Bryan.

Bella has recovered well from her ordeal and is a sociable and friendly girl. She would be best suited to a couple or a family with older children.

If you would like more information about Bella, or to find out more about the large number of cats and kittens that the Birmingham Adoption Centre have available, please visit [www.birmingham.cats.org.uk](http://www.birmingham.cats.org.uk) or call 01564 822020. For other areas contact [www.cats.org.uk](http://www.cats.org.uk) Tel: 01825 741219 🐾

**Above:** Bella means beautiful – This friendly, sociable girl is now looking for a forever home.

**Left:** The stick found in Bella's stomach was three inches long

**Below:** Bella in recovery.

