Radiation Oncology Services

VETERINARY SPECIALTY HOSPITAL

Admissions
Admission time for Radiation Oncology patients is between 7:30-9:00 am. Special arrangements can be made if this time is inconvenient for you. You also have the option of scheduling an appointed time and waiting for the treatment to be completed. After the initial treatment you can plan on most treatments taking about 60 minutes. Please be sure that your pet has not eaten after 10pm or had any water after 7am if they are to be treated or to have any other anesthetic procedure. If it is necessary to give their morning medication with food and your pet will be getting treated in the morning please wait until after the treatment is completed to give the medication. If your pet is not being treated until the afternoon the medication may be given with a small treat.
Please fill out the progress notes form and be sure to leave the best number to contact you for that day and the time that you would like to pick up.

Pick up times
Pick up times can be scheduled for any time. Patients picked up before 5:30 pm will be discharged by a radiation therapy technician. Discharges after 5:30 will be handled by a ward technician.

Telephone communications
If your pet is staying with us during its course of treatments, you will receive a telephone call each day to give you an update on treatment and progress. We will make our call once your pet's treatment is done for the day.

Please call us if you have any questions at any time. The Radiation Oncology team will be at the hospital Monday-Friday 7:30 –6:00 pm. If you call at other times you will speak with a technician or the emergency doctor but they will be able to relay important information to Dr. Burke and the rest of the team. Please be aware that if you go to voice mail and the Oncology team is not present your concerns may not be addressed until they return, if you have a pressing concern please speak to an available technician who will be able to determine who is best able to help you.

Frequently Asked Questions
A diagnosis of cancer is devastating for people and animals alike. The decision to treat cancer in our pets can be very difficult since we must make that decision for them. No one wants to let them suffer from their disease, but no one wants to make them worse with treatment, either. Veterinary medicine has made great advances in treating animals with the same cancer therapies used for human beings – surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. When combined, these treatments can greatly improve survival and quality of life in our animal patients.

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While many people are interested in treating their pet's disease, they are worried that these therapies will be too aggressive and make things worse. Radiation therapy in particular can be intimidating and many people are not sure what it involves. The purpose of this hand-out is to describe briefly the basics of radiation therapy.

What is Radiation Therapy?
Radiation therapy is any cancer treatment that involves killing tumor cells by exposing them to X-rays, gamma-rays, or electrons. There are several methods for administering radiation to a tumor. The most common method is to focus multiple X-ray beams on the tumor from different directions. This allows the radiation dose to be concentrated on the tumor while avoiding normal tissues as best as possible. This type of treatment is called "external beam radiation therapy" and is the method used at the Veterinary Specialty Hospital.

When is Radiation Therapy Used?
Radiation therapy is very useful for controlling localized tumors. It can be given by itself but it is often used along with surgery. Radiation may be administered either before or after surgery is performed – the best time to give radiation depends on the location, size, and type of cancer. Radiation can also be used along with chemotherapy to treat tumors such as lymphoma and melanoma. The optimal treatment may involve all three treatment modalities – surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy.

What Happens Before Radiation Therapy Can Begin?
Radiation therapy should not begin until complete staging of the disease has been completed. Staging refers to determining the extent of the disease in the patient's body. It is of utmost importance to make sure there are no other tumors or metastases prior to therapy. Staging tests will be different for each tumor but they typically include a biopsy of the tumor, complete blood work, a urinalysis, radiographs of the chest, and an ultrasound of the abdomen. Some patients will require a CT scan or an MRI to determine the extent of the tumor or to plan radiation therapy.

How is Radiation Therapy Administered?
Radiation therapy must be given over several days to avoid excessive damage to the normal tissue around the tumor. A typical course of therapy involves a single treatment given once a day, Monday through Friday, for approximately three or four weeks. The total number of treatments may vary depending on the type, location, and size of the tumor. To ensure that our patients remain absolutely still during therapy, they must be anesthetized for each treatment. Once anesthetized, our patients are placed on a treatment couch and positioned carefully to treat the tumor. The radiation treatment itself is painless, although side effects are expected. Once the treatment is completed, our patients wake up and may go home that day.

Are Multiple Anesthesias Dangerous?
Any episode of anesthesia carries some risk. Fortunately, most of our patients are healthy aside from their tumor and have no greater risk for complications, even with daily anesthesia. Our anesthesia protocols are designed for smooth inductions and rapid

recoveries; most patients are under for only 20-30 minutes and can go home soon after waking up. Our radiation technicians are trained and highly experienced in anesthesia and all of our patients are closely monitored while they are under.

What are the Side Effects of Radiation Therapy?
No cancer therapy is completely free of side effects and radiation therapy is no exception. In fact, certain side effects are unavoidable but we can take steps to make them as mild and brief as possible. It is important to note that side effects only occur within the irradiated field and do not cause widespread problems. The types of side effects and the tissues that will be affected depend entirely on the area that is treated.

Side effects can be divided into two categories – acute and late side effects. Acute side effects are expected, are almost never life-threatening, and can be treated medically. Acute side effects appear during the course of treatment and usually heal without complication by two weeks post-therapy.

Typical Acute Side Effects:
Hair loss (alopecia), reddening of the skin (erythema), mild to moderate erosion of the skin (desquamation) or oral tissues (mucositis), eye irritation (keratitis)

Late side effects are uncommon and they take many months before they appear, if they appear at all. Late side effects usually cannot be treated so our radiation treatment protocols are designed to minimize the chance that they will occur.

Typical Late Side Effects:
Darkened skin (hyperpigmentation), cataracts, potential damage to spinal cord, brain, or lung
In most cases the benefits of radiation therapy outweigh the risks of possible side effects. Dr. Burke will be certain to discuss possible side effects at the time of your consultation.