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Options for pets with cancer
 Tails of Two Cities

BY DEBORAH R. MEYER

Nacho was a little kitten who became a Tiger.

"I found Nacho in 1995 during my junior year at Clemson," said Josh Kesterson. "I decided to take her in, and she immediately became a part of my life. She was with me through graduate school, my first job and first house."

The gifts the cat offered were simple but immeasurable treasures.

When Nacho was diagnosed with cancer, Kesterson and his wife wanted to do what they could to help her. They chose to have chemotherapy done.

"We knew it was going to be expensive, but decided that if her quality of life declined or it became unbearable for her, we would discontinue treatment," Kesterson said.

Nacho was treated with three rounds of chemotherapy over the course of six months at the Veterinary Specialty Hospital of the Carolinas in Cary (www.vshcarolinas.com).

The initial treatment showed promise; the cancer decreased in size, and after a break, she received the second and third treatments. The process took a toll.

"It was difficult at first seeing how weak she became," Kesterson said.

The third treatment became Nacho's last.

"We decided to stop when Nacho was too weak and her demeanor had changed," he said. "She began to refuse all food, even raw scallops or fish. We knew it was time. We took her in for a last visit and a long goodbye.




When Josh Kesterson's cat Nacho was diagnosed with cancer, he decided to have her treated with chemotherapy.

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"I don't regret the choice, but it was difficult. I don't know if I would do it again. It was hard. If we had not decided to offer her treatment, I would have felt that we didn't give her a chance."

Cancer in our companion animals is a tragedy that many of us have dealt with or will have to deal with.

Veterinarian Jonathan Fogle is a board certified internal medicine specialist at Triangle Veterinary Emergency Clinic in Durham (www.trianglevec.com). He said more and more people are seeking cancer treatments for their pets.

"I don't think people realize how lucky we are in the Triangle area and in the entire state to have access to so many specialists for advanced care in our animals," Fogle said.

A year and a half ago the Emergency Clinic greatly expanded its services (they are now open during the day, not just at night) and, among other things, began to offer chemotherapy and surgery for dogs and cats.

Most of the Emergency Clinic's cancer patients are referred by their primary veterinarian.

"We spend a lot of time doing verbal consultations, particularly with the initial diagnosis," said Fogle, who does his utmost to give clients realistic expectations. "We talk about whether or not we feel we can achieve remission-long term prognosis and short-term prognosis. We talk about financial considerations. Then the quality of life is extremely important. You cannot explain to a dog or a cat, 'I am giving you this chemo drug and it will make you really, really sick.' We try to achieve minimal side effects with maximum times of remission."

Veterinarian Steven Suter is board certified in medical oncology at the N.C. State University College of Veterinary Medicine and has a doctorate in molecular biology. He and the veterinary school will soon announce the start of a program offering bone marrow transplants for dogs with cancer, mostly lymphoma.

To Suter's knowledge, there is only one other facility, a private veterinary practice in Seattle, that offers such transplants for pets. The cost of the procedure is substantial, and may be beyond many people's capabilities, but Suter has set up some foundations that may defray some of the costs. (See www.cvm.ncsu.edu to make a donation; there are also links to reputable cancer sites.)

"One of the most frustrating parts in our mind is veterinarians waiting to treat an animal with cancer," Suter said. "The minute you see a little mass, or something is wrong, get to a specialist right away."

Diane Thomas did just that. Her eight-year-old rescue dog Ginger was limping a bit.

"I thought she must have pulled something," Thomas said. "The next two days, something bothered me. She was lethargic, didn't jump on the bed or sofa. Her body language wasn't right."

Thomas took Ginger to the vet the next morning.

Ginger was diagnosed with lymphoma, a type of blood cell cancer. "Don't waste time," Thomas said. "There can be a longer life span if you catch it earlier. It was in her liver, spleen, lymph nodes. They scheduled us for chemo the next morning. I now know more about chemo and treatment protocols than I ever wanted."

Chemotherapy is often hard on the patient; Ginger is nauseated sometimes and doesn't

want to eat after her treatments at The Veterinary Specialty Hospital in Cary. But she is still ready to go on walks and play with the cats. She savors trips to the beach. Her tail wags and wags.

"I wouldn't trade this time for anything," Thomas said.

Deborah R. Meyer can be contacted at eloise@nando.com or at 942-3252.

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