

JIM HUGHES BVM&S, MRCVS

[INSERT PHOTO JIM]

Has over 20 years experience in both small animal and large animal veterinary practice and is a director of Blake Veterinary Group Ltd

It's that time of year again when everywhere you look there are pink-beribboned ladies out on the streets, or perhaps I should say, roads, dressed in their tracksuits and trainers. Have they been inspired by the London Marathon? Possibly they have, but as they accost you for sponsorship, you realise that it is all in aid of that wonderful event – the “Race for Life” – which takes place at a variety of venues over the spring and summer to raise money for cancer research, indeed Mrs Hughes is taking part in one next week

In recent years, thanks to such efforts to support the research charities, there have been huge advances made in the treatment and survival of people with breast cancer and it seemed timely to look at the same disease in our pets. “Breast cancer” does exist in dogs and cats but is generally referred to as “mammary neoplasia” or mammary tumours.

In cats, mammary tumours occur much less frequently than in dogs or humans but it tends to be a serious disease when it arises. The incidence of the disease is probably low because the tendency is for most cat owners to have their female cats spayed when relatively young – frequently before they have had their first season. Indeed these days it is generally acknowledged that there is no reason not to have female cats spayed at around 3 -4 months of age. It is assumed that by removing the ovaries at a young age, the mammary glands are never subjected to the hormonal influences which cause normal maturation and development of mammary tissue but which also play a part in the onset of tumours.

Unfortunately in cats, approximately 86% of mammary tumours are malignant and this probably reflects the difficulty with cats in making an early diagnosis. I believe I am right in saying that in humans, much of the improvements in survival are related to increased awareness of the disease (in part, thanks to those runners again) and early detection of the presence of a lump. While many people routinely stroke and groom their cats, this is generally done over the head and back and unlike your dog, who as a demonstration of their delight in seeing you, may well roll around on her back, giving you a clear view of her mammaries in all their glory, start to stroke your cat's tummy and she is more likely to bite and scratch you than thank you for it. The upshot of this is that while relatively uncommon, mammary tumours may well be significantly advanced before they are detected. The success of treatment depends on how far advanced the disease is at the time of diagnosis, but it is important to recognise that the most effective treatment is mastectomy that is, removal of the affected gland and that the smaller the tumour at the time of surgery, the longer the survival time is likely to be.

In dogs, the disease is relatively more common – mammary tumours being one of the most common types of tumour in female dogs. Unlike in cats, the majority of mammary tumours in dogs are benign although they are more likely to have multiple tumours in different glands arising more or less simultaneously. There are a number

of factors that increase the risk of your bitch developing mammary tumours. As with cats, the effects of female hormones are significant, the disease being more likely in bitches that have not been neutered and especially those who have had hormonal treatments to manipulate their seasons or prevent unwanted litters. Indeed, those bitches who are spayed earlier in life e.g. at 6 months old before they have had a season are less at risk than those spayed later. Obesity also appears to be another risk factor, which is avoidable by strict attention to diet and exercise.

Bitches, and occasionally male dogs, can get a variety of different types of tumour and while the majority tend to be benign, it is important to remember that they can develop and become malignant as they grow and therefore, prompt attention and treatment is essential to improve the outcome. Treatment generally means surgery again – sometimes removal of just the lump itself can be sufficient, sometimes removal of the whole gland or even all the glands down the affected side is necessary. The value of other treatments such as chemotherapy and hormonal treatments is not really fully determined. It can require further tests to determine the best course of action but the most important thing to remember is that early diagnosis leading to prompt treatment is likely to result in the best outcome.

So the take home message – remember to have a regular rub of the dogs tummy – and also the cat – even if she doesn't much like it – and if you find a lump, get it checked. It could save your pets life.

And in the meantime, give generously to those runners or get out there and do some training yourself. It'll do you good and it really does save lives.