Can Cancer Treatments for Dogs Help Humans?

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While rodents have long been the prime subjects of cancer research and experimental drugs, companion animals—such as dogs and cats—are becoming more common. Scientists believe that cancer treatments for these furry friends may help humans too, reports STAT.

According to the American Veterinary Medical Foundation, 50 percent of dogs over age 10 will develop cancer. In addition, dogs get cancer at the same rate as humans. (There is a lack of information about the rate of cancer among cats, but some cancers are more common in felines than canines.)

“For a long time, we’ve looked at humans to see how to treat dogs,” said Michael Kent, MAS, a radiation oncologist and veterinarian at the University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. “We’re starting to do a little bit of the reverse now.”

Researchers have found that dogs and humans share a similar biological makeup. In fact, it’s difficult to distinguish between a dog and human tumors under a microscope. This is why investigators believe finding new cancer treatments for canines could also be significant for humans as well. Furthermore, surgical procedures for dogs can be easily adapted for humans. (It’s happened in the case of limb-saving bone cancer surgery.) Another benefit is that dogs are much closer in size to humans than laboratory animals.

Across the United States, treatments being tested on pets include immune therapy, stem cell treatments and cutting-edge CAR-T cell therapy (a process that uses a patient’s own immune system to kill the body’s cancer cells).

But cancer isn’t the only area of medical research that companion animals are being used for. Scientists have also shifted their focus to infectious disease, cardiology and neurology. One veterinary cardiologist uses dogs to study why family members with the same inherited genetic defect display different manifestations of cardiomyopathy, a heart disease.

“I’m not going to do anything to advance science at the costs of my patients,” Kent said. “But if we can learn from them and help them as well, that’s a really good goal. And if we can help humans as well, that’s great.”

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