

Are English Cocker spaniels at particular risk of anal sac tumours?

Unfortunately it would appear that English Cocker spaniels (and to a lesser extent Springer and Cavalier King Charles spaniels) are at higher risk of developing anal sac tumours than other dogs. This conclusion is based upon the analysis of large numbers of cases of anal sac tumours using data from veterinary pathology laboratories and breed registration data from The British Kennel Club.

This raises the concern that perhaps there is a degree of inherited risk. However, there is more than one possible explanation. Other possibilities include what we would term environmental challenges; by this we mean that there might be lifestyle factors that are specific to the way in which spaniels live that somehow predispose them to anal sac tumour development.

In the field of cancer therapy, things would be so much better if we could gain some advance warning of cancer problems. Without doubt, the outcome for cancer patients is so much better if the tumour can be identified at the earliest possible stage and if suitable therapy can be instituted then rather than later. This often also means that the therapy is much less involved. Therefore one of the aims of cancer practitioners is to gain deeper insight into the development of tumours so that a better understanding of the way in which the cancer develops can be obtained.

Certain dog families can carry higher risks of tumour development. Knowledge of individual patients' pedigrees allows us to perform some fairly complicated analyses to tell us whether the risks are inherited and how much risk is found in specific families.

A joint project is currently being undertaken by Gerry Polton of Davies Veterinary Specialists, Hertfordshire, UK and David Sargan of Cambridge University Veterinary School, UK. The aim of this project is to establish whether there is an inherited risk of the development of anal sac tumours in English Cocker spaniels. If you or colleagues have ever experienced this tumour, it could be of great value to the future health of English Cocker spaniels if a DNA sample from the affected patient could be submitted for inclusion in the analysis. To this end, owners of affected English Cocker spaniels are being invited to ask their veterinarian to forward a blood sample for inclusion in a detailed genetic analysis.

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