

Pets battling cancer can join clinical trials too

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Vets, physicians say a new system may speed up drug discovery for dogs, cats and humans.

(HealthDay)—If you hear that a friend's beloved family member has joined a clinical trial for cancer treatment, don't assume the patient is human.

Cancer is the leading cause of death in older dogs and cats, and [clinical trials](#) offer hope that effective medications will be developed—for humans and their four-legged friends, cancer experts say.

The new National Veterinary Cancer Registry, launched last month by a national team of animal and [human cancer](#) doctors, will point [pet owners](#) toward clinical trials that might benefit their beloved companions and speed up the development of life-saving therapies for humans.

"We will be able to decrease the cost and beat the time involved in [drug discovery](#)," said the registry's founder, Dr. Theresa Fossum, a professor of surgery at Texas A&M University's college of veterinary medicine.

Because many similar diseases affect people and their animals, veterinarians and physicians say a lot can be learned from studying how treatments work in cats and dogs.

The drug-assessment process could be accelerated by a simple fact: dogs age many times faster than humans, and their cancers progress more rapidly too. Also, many canine and feline cancers—including sarcoma; non-Hodgkin lymphoma; leukemia; mesothelioma; and bone, ovarian, kidney, uterine and oral cancers—are virtually the same cancers humans have.

Experts not involved with the registry said the concept of the database looks promising.

"These clinical trials would be more real-world than a lab experiment," said Dr. Peter Rabinowitz, associate professor of medicine at Yale School of Medicine and head of the Yale Human Animal Medicine Project, which studies clinical connections between human and animal medicine.

Dogs often are an interesting model for better understanding environmentally induced cancers, Rabinowitz said. "Asbestos causes cancer in humans 35 years [after exposure], but if you're a dog, you get it in four to five years, so we can see how the cancers develop more naturally," he said.

Fossum said she has always been bothered by the slow and cumbersome way drugs are tested. "If it's a cancer drug, they're going to put a human tumor in a mouse ... but it's not very predictive of how drugs will work in

people," she said.

Then, after tests to see if the drugs might be toxic in humans, the drugs are evaluated in human clinical trials, which take more than a decade to conduct. "So the drugs that are coming out now were starting [to be evaluated] 12 years ago," she said.

Testing the drugs in pets speeds up the process, allowing researchers to determine if a medication works before taking it to human clinical trials, Fossum said. With a pet owner's informed consent, "we can try a new drug that seems promising a lot sooner," she said.

The concept of a cancer database for dogs and cats could expand to include other diseases, such as diabetes. About 800,000 dogs have type 1 diabetes in the United States, Fossum said. Other conditions that a veterinary registry could serve include endocrine, neurological and cardiac issues.

About 6 million dogs and 6 million cats in the United States receive a cancer diagnosis each year, according to the Animal Cancer Foundation, in Norwalk, Conn. If your dog or cat is one of them, you can register your pet with the National Veterinary Cancer Registry.

The registry was created by a consortium of animal and human [cancer](#) doctors, including specialists from the Baylor Healthcare System in Texas, the Texas Veterinary Oncology Group and the CARE Foundation, a Florida-based animal rescue and wildlife education organization.

Because the registry is new, it may take some time before effective clinical trial matchmaking can occur between animals and drug developers, Fossum said.

More information: Learn more about the connection between animal and human health from the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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