

My 7 year old dog was diagnosed with bone cancer. My veterinarian and a specialist both are recommending I have his leg amputated. I am very reluctant to put him through that. I can't imagine how a dog can manage on 3 legs and live a happy life. Is it fair to him?

I'm sorry to hear of your dog's diagnosis. I know it can be very difficult to rationally consider all of the options for his treatment. There are several reasons why you may be encouraged to consider amputation of his leg. Bone cancer causes severe pain and sometimes amputation is suggested to relieve the pain. Make sure you have discussed all of the latest drug and alternative therapies that are available to reduce cancer pain before deciding on amputation. Another reason for amputation is that weakened cancerous bone can be more easily fractured from normal daily activity.

You are certainly not alone in your reluctance to agree to the amputation. We have many clients who feel the same way and would rather euthanize their dog than imagine it living with 3 legs. While you are considering this difficult and very emotional decision, ask your veterinarian if you could speak with another client whose dog has undergone the same surgery. You may have trouble believing your doctor when she says your dog will adjust quickly and do fine, but you may believe a fellow dog owner. There are also videos your vet can show you of dogs who get around very well post amputation. In some cases, they resume their normal activity level and it is hard to even tell they are missing a leg. There are also various internet sites for owners of 3-legged dogs that have discussion forums and stores for purchasing customized assistive devices such as harnesses for their dogs. One example is tripawds.com.

As long as your dog isn't obese or suffering from severe arthritis in his remaining legs, he should be able to learn how to balance and get around very quickly after he recovers from the surgery. Due to the pain in his bad leg, he probably hasn't been putting much pressure on it for a while, so he has already prepared himself for life with 3 legs. If there is a question that a dog may not be a good candidate for amputation due to other problems, it is possible to bandage the leg in a flexed position so it isn't touching the ground and give him a day or so to see how he manages.

Another important point is the fact that dogs don't have the emotional and psychological distress after an amputation that we humans would face. It is often the dog's owner and not the dog who has the problem accepting the change in his body.

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