

## Mammary Tumors in Cats

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One of the reasons [veterinarians](#) recommend spaying [cats](#) is that it is an easy, affordable and efficient way to prevent mammary or breast [tumors](#). These tumors are a huge problem for cats. According to the [American College of Veterinary Surgeons](#), 85% of them are [cancerous](#) (i.e. only 15% are benign!)

### What causes mammary tumors in cats?

Mammary tumors develop because of spikes in female hormone (estrogens) that take place during a cat's heat cycle. By spaying a cat at 6 months of [age](#) or before her first heat cycle, it virtually eliminates the risk of getting mammary tumors.

### What if your cat already has mammary tumors?

Since [spaying](#) prevents mammary tumors, should a cat older than 6 months with mammary tumors be spayed? Yes, without any doubt. Again, spaying at that age will not prevent mammary tumors. However, it will eliminate the risk of pyometra, a life-threatening [infection](#) of the uterus. Therefore, if you are in this situation, you should have an open discussion with your vet, understand the pros and cons, and decide what makes the most sense.

### How will your veterinarian check for mammary tumors?

Most mammary masses are found on a [physical exam](#) by a veterinarian. Occasionally, a mass is found by the guardian or by a groomer, especially in a cat who enjoys belly rubs. Most masses are not painful. When they outgrow the [skin](#) or rub on the floor, they can become ulcerated, which means that the skin has opened up and the mass can bleed.

### How can we tell if a mammary mass is

### benign or cancerous?

Looking at a mass, or feeling it, doesn't help us determine the diagnosis. The only way to diagnose the type of mammary mass is by taking a biopsy and sending it to the lab for analysis. In most cases, the mass is surgically removed first, and then sent to a pathologist.

### How will your veterinarian decide whether to biopsy the mass first or not?

How do we decide whether to biopsy first or not? As a general rule, I recommend taking a biopsy first if there is a chance it will change the treatment plan. Since the vast majority of mammary tumors are cancerous in cats, the question is hardly ever "is it cancer or not?" but "do I want it if off my cat no matter what it is?"

### Next steps

Before [anesthesia](#) is undertaken, blood work should be performed to make sure major organs are functioning well. Before a biopsy or surgery is performed, chest [X-rays](#) should be taken to make sure the tumor hasn't spread to the lungs.

Patients go home the day of or the day after surgery. They need 2-3 weeks of recovery, confinement and an Elizabethan collar. Antibiotics and pain medication are prescribed for about 1 week. Stitches are removed after about 2 weeks.

If the tumor is confirmed to be cancerous, your veterinarian may suggest you meet with an oncologist or cancer specialist, to see which treatment can be offered beyond surgery to help your cat.

As with all masses, the sooner mammary gland tumors are addressed, the more options you have to treat and the better the outcome. If you feel a mass on your cat, please make an appointment and discuss all treatment options with your veterinarian.

### Questions to ask your veterinarian:

- What did the blood work and the chest X-rays show?
- Should we spay my cat in addition to removing the mass?
- What can we do besides surgery to help my cat?