

Herps and Cancer

Can a lizard get cancer in its leg? If so, should the leg be amputated?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

Can a bearded dragon get cancer in its leg? If so, should the leg be amputated?

Yes, all lizards and herps can develop cancer. I suspect you are talking about either bone cancer or extensive cancer in a limb, which would require more invasive surgery than just removal of the mass.

If this is the case, it would be best and safest to amputate the limb. This offers the best chance for long-term survival and prevents the cancer from returning. Some cancers will spread through the bloodstream or lymphatics to other locations, making surgical amputation ineffective. It would depend on the type of cancer involved. Radiographs (x-rays) or ultrasound might be helpful in determining if the cancer has already spread to other organs, such as the liver or lungs.

Malignant (cancerous) bone tumors or extensively infiltrating cancerous tumors would respond best to amputation of the affected limb.

Recently I diagnosed a case of leukemia in a bearded dragon, so they can also develop cancer of the bone marrow and blood cells. While cancers are rarer in reptiles – and even more so in some amphibians – they can and do occur from time to time.

If you have specific questions, you should discuss them with your herp vet, or if you are not comfortable with the diagnosis, you should ask your vet to refer to a larger referral center or veterinary college for a second opinion.

I hope this helps.

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Need a Herp Vet?

If you are looking for a herp-knowledgeable veterinarian in your area, a good place to start is by checking the list of members on the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarian (ARAV) web site at www.arav.com. Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.