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# APPALOOSA

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# Cancer treatment

An Appaloosa owner relates her horse's real-life story of squamous cell carcinoma.

**M**y veterinarian asked his intern, "What do you think?" With a glance at me, the intern made a scooping motion with her finger, accompanied with a popping sound, to signify she thought removal of the eye was the best option. My 21-year-old Appaloosa mare, "Ginger," had an open, ulcerated, walnut-sized squamous cell carcinoma — a cancerous tumor — in her lower eyelid. In all my years of horse ownership, I'd never seen anything like this.

Dr. Axel Sondhof of Saratoga Equine Veterinary Hospital in Saratoga Springs, New York, felt Ginger would be a good candidate for treatment with Cisplatin. A form of chemotherapy, this intralesional cancer drug is injected directly into the tumor. If Ginger didn't fare well with the Cisplatin, cutting away the affected tissue would be an option. However, there probably wouldn't be enough healthy tissue remaining, and the eyeball would have to be removed. I opted to give Ginger the benefit of the doubt and try the chemo first. Dr. Sondhof recommended a three-phase course of treatment that included an injection of Cisplatin every two to three weeks.

## SQUAMOUS CELL CARCINOMAS

Skin tumors are fairly common in light-skinned breeds such as Appaloosas, Paints, Pintos, Albinos and draft breeds. "Any horse that has minimal pigment around the eye is at high risk for squamous cells," says Dr. Marjorie Neaderland of the Animal Eye Clinic in Norwalk, Connecticut. "The lack of pigment around the periocular tissues leaves them predisposed to sun damage."

UV rays hasten the tumors' development and being in or near the eye presents greater problems, as vision can be impaired. Options and methods of treating squamous cells have evolved with veterinary medicine, and cases where vision may have been lost in the past now have a greater chance of being saved.

The third eyelid is the most common site for squamous cells, followed by the conjunctiva and the cornea,



Ginger's tumor, prior to her first treatment, nearly covered her right eye.



Dr. Axel Sondhof of Saratoga Equine Veterinary Hospital treated Ginger with Cisplatin.



The tumor, after the first treatment, looks marginally better. Other treatments will be necessary.



Ginger's left eye was treated in 2003 for the same type of cancer. It has healed completely.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETI SPANGEL

respectively. "Usually it goes from the conjunctiva on to the cornea," Dr. Neaderland says. "It doesn't usually grow into the eye but covers the surface of the eye."

### STARTING CHEMO

For the first treatment, trying to keep Ginger as comfortable as possible, we inadvertently sedated her a bit too much. I never realized how heavy a horse's head was until I had to support one for a long time.

Dr. Sondhof rinsed out the eye and surrounding membranes with a saline solution and gently wiped out the tumor with gauze. It started to bleed a bit, which looked quite dramatic when mixed with saline and running down Ginger's face. He then squirted the area with a topical numbing agent.

Prior to injection, Dr. Sondhof mixed the Cisplatin with sesame oil, which holds the drug in the area as it slowly diffuses into and then kills the cancer cells. Clad in full surgical gear, he connected the syringe containing the Cisplatin to a long, narrow tube that fed into a fine needle. He then placed the needle in three different locations around the tumor, injecting small amounts of the Cisplatin in each location. Ginger, a notorious head-tosser, merely blinked and twitched a bit from the sedation as her chin rested heavily in my arms.

Following the injections, she received a shot of Banamine, which would continue in the paste form for a couple of days, as well as the antibiotic powder Tucoprim. Post-op directions were to not touch the eye or any discharge for three days, as Cisplatin can be absorbed through the skin. After that I could apply an ophthalmic ointment. I was also to keep her fly mask on and watch for any substantial swelling, although some was to be expected. Another treatment was scheduled for two weeks later.

About three days later, I wasn't sure if I was seeing improvement or if I was optimistically imagining things. This big, red, goopy mass on her eyelid seemed to have improved. Over the next two weeks it continued to dry out, shrink in size, and look less angry. Ginger seemed in good spirits except when I applied the topical ointment, at which she still pulled away.

The overall results were dramatic. Two weeks after the first treatment, Dr. Sondhof expressed great pleasure with the results. After the second treatment, the results continued to be significant and encouraging. Three weeks after the second treatment, Dr. Sondhof evaluated her eye and we both felt that there would be little improvement if a third round

was done. All that remained of the original tumor was some modest scar tissue on the lower eyelid.

### IT'S BACK

Two and a half years later, at what seemed like an alarming rate, a tumor appeared on the lower eyelid of Ginger's other eye.

We recently completed the third round of Cisplatin treatments on this new tumor, but the results have been discouraging. The mass shrunk a bit, but there's still swelling and ulceration in the corner of her eye. It irritates her enough that she rubs it, which makes it worse. She may become a one-eyed horse after all.

"The biggest factor in the success [of ensuring eradication] is detecting re-growth at the very earliest time, and jumping right on it," Dr. Neaderland says. "When you notice a little zit there, that's when you have to jump on it. The earlier you can get the lesions, the better chance you have for not disfiguring the horse with skin tumors."

Other methods of squamous cell treatment include surgical removal, cryosurgery (freezing the tissue off with liquid nitrogen), immunotherapy (using a vaccine injected into the tumor tissue to stimulate the production of anti-cancer cells), radiation treatment, and burning the growths off.

As with most ailments, preventive maintenance goes a long way. Paint breeder Cheryl Richards of Painted Dreams Ranch in Hadensville, Virginia, uses various methods of prevention. "To protect our horses from tumors and cancer, we try to provide shade in our pastures," she says. "We treat them every morning during the summer with sunblock, SPF 45 - 50, especially those with white noses. We keep fly masks on our horses during the day - especially important for our cremellos that are all pink-skinned and blue-eyed."

Dr. Neaderland concurs. "Mesh flymasks cut out 80 percent of the UV light," she says. "I'd recommend them to any Appaloosa owner. Then apply suntan lotion around the eye, avoiding the eyelid."

### GINGER'S FUTURE

Ginger's next course of treatment has yet to be decided. I'll have to weigh the options available given her age, overall health and cost of various treatments. Even now at age 23, I still want to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Dr. Neaderland empathizes. "I've worked with some fabulous Appaloosas over the years," she says. "They're really pretty darn tough horses." 🐾