

ZOOM!'s Lymphoma Journey

By Pam Groves

This unwanted and uninvited journey began on August 15, 2015, when I noticed my nine year old Westie named ZOOM! had swollen lymph nodes in his jaw area. At the time I had no idea what this symptom could be.

Naturally it was a Saturday afternoon after our vet's office had closed. I jumped online to try to figure out what could be the cause. First thing on Monday I got in to see our local veterinarian who ran a complete lab panel, checked for tick borne illnesses, and took a chest X-ray. All his labs came back normal. However, when she did a needle aspiration of one of the swollen lymph nodes, she concluded the abnormal looking cells might indicate lymphoma.

Taking a more natural rearing approach, ZOOM! hadn't received vaccinations after his 1st year boosters in 2006. He did get a 3-year Rabies vaccination in May 2015, but no other vaccinations other than that. I used no bug sprays or herbicides in the environment ZOOM! was always on high quality grain free treats and grain free dry kibble. He received a monthly oral heartworm preventive which I stopped once he was diagnosed with lymphoma. A topical flea/tick preventive was applied in the summer months and this too was stopped once he was diagnosed with lymphoma.

The veterinarian gave me a referral to the University of Illinois Veterinary School Cancer Care Unit (U of IL) and we were able to schedule an appointment that same week. The entire drive home from the vet's I was in tears. I had prepared myself for the worst, but had hoped it was just an infection. We drove the 90 miles to the U of IL. The visit lasted from 10 am until 5 pm. The student went

over all the tests my vet had sent and did a lengthy exam of ZOOM!. All of this was then presented to the resident oncologist who talked to us about treatment options, costs, time commitments, and remission rates. They did another needle aspiration of one of the swollen lymph nodes to be reviewed by their Board Certified Pathologists.



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They told us ZOOM! had Stage 3, Sub-stage A lymphoma. In a very short time we had to decide if we wanted to start chemotherapy, as the sooner it is started the better. We had to consider the courses of treatment, the costs, and how the logistics of the 180 mile round trip once a week to the U of IL might impact my job. My previous Westies had lived to be 15 and 17 years of age, and ZOOM! was only nine. I felt I needed to at least try the chemo with him.

The oncologist suggested five protocols: First, the University of Wisconsin Madison/CHOP chemotherapeutic protocol which is the gold standard and the most effective. CHOP is the acronym for a combination of four drugs: Cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin, vincristine and prednisone. This is also the most expensive in terms of cost (\$3000-\$4000) and time (at least 26 weeks) to put the dog in remission. The second was a single agent, Doxorubicin, with a cost of \$1500-\$2000. The third was CCNU (Lomustine) with a cost of \$750-\$900. The fourth was Prednisone alone. The fifth suggested alternating Doxorubicin and CCNU. None of these costs included any local labs done and sent to the University of Illinois.

I decided to go with the best protocol with the best chance of remission. I picked him up after his first chemo treatment, and except for the shaved hair and vet wrap on

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his leg, a person would never know he'd been treated. They sent Metronidazole, an antibiotic, if needed for diarrhea and Cerenia for nausea. We were told 80% of dogs have no side effects. They do not give huge doses of the drugs like they do with people



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since with animals they aren't trying to cure but create remission. Side effects would show up 3-5 days after treatment, and they sent a prescription for Predisone. He did lose hair on his face, but that was all.

The second chemo treatment came in the form of a pill to be given after he had local labs done and got the OK. I resumed ZOOM!'s agility classes, and tried to keep his life as normal as possible. He had no side effects in the 4 weeks we did the CHOP protocol.

By the fifth week he should have been in remission, but at our next U of IL visit I was told the treatments had failed, and he was not in remission. The treatment plan was changed to CCNU with an injection of Elspar. Since this treatment can raise liver enzymes, Denamarin was added to help protect his liver. The enlarged lymph nodes went down very fast, but in October we had to stop the CCNU as it dangerously elevated his Alkaline Phosphatase (ALK) enzymes.

The following Monday he returned for a DTIC treatment, which involved a 5 hour infusion given to avoid nausea. He did get sick, but after I got him home that night, he was in good spirits and ate his dinner. Three weeks later ZOOM! returned for an all day session, but the head of oncology called to report his lymph nodes were starting to enlarge again as well as his liver and spleen. She felt

that none of these protocols would help him. At this point I decided to do the Predisone only with him starting in December. I also visited a holistic vet who recommended diet changes, herbal and nutritional supplements and essential oils. The plan was to wean him off the Predisone, but that never happened.

In the middle of January, ZOOM! had a very rough day, and he got an injection of antibiotics and a higher dose of Predisone. He began to feel better, and I began cooking his meals with some recipes from the holistic vet. However, on February 16 when I went into the kitchen that morning, he wasn't himself. He wouldn't eat or drink water, and I noticed his breathing was very loud and labored. I made the decision we all dread: I made that final vet appointment for late the next afternoon.

I got home early and held him on my lap, telling him how much I loved him, I said that he had fought a long, hard fight, and it was OK to stop fighting. I continued to hold him for an hour, and at 3:00 pm, February 17, 2016, he took his last breath of air in my arms. I feel blessed that he died at home in my arms. It was exactly six months to the day that he was diagnosed with this horrible disease. Looking back I can say I learned more than I ever wanted

to know about cancer and lymphoma. Do I regret the expense and time commitments: No. If I had done nothing, he probably would have lived only three or four weeks. I had six months of quality life with him, doing agility and Barnhunt and living a relatively normal life.

I cherish my time with him, from a four month old pup on Petfinder to a courageous, happy ten year old. ZOOM! Tear N Up Terrain will live in my heart forever.



ZOOM!