

Fritz One, Cancer Zero: A Westie's Experience With Neuro Fibro Sarcoma

By Bill O'Such & Ineke Rühland

One Monday we were rubbing the tummy of our eight-year-old Westie, Fritz, and discovered a little bump the size of a green pea. We looked closely and didn't see any abrasions, and wondered what it was. We didn't think much of it and thought it was probably due to being bumped by a visitor seated in a rolling office chair the previous day, which had caused him to let out a little yelp. After a day or two of daily tummy rubs (he never fails to ask for them), it didn't go away and we began to wonder what it really was. After a couple more days, we decided to visit Pets Unlimited in San Francisco. Though a wonderful veterinarian facility, Fritz trembles with fear there as he now associates it with unpleasant things in the past (i.e. two cruciate ligament surgeries, a dislocated disk in his back, a bee sting, and various other little ailments).

Dr. Kathy Gervais inspected our little guy and used a needle to aspirate a sample from the bump for analysis. Two days later, we received a phone call that the sample had cancerous spindle cells in it. This was quite a shock especially since we treat Fritz to home-cooked meals, filtered water and lots of tender loving care. Of course, we wondered what we did to cause him to get it and started reading everything on the web about this type of cancer. There are no definitive answers yet to causality, but theories include over-vaccination, environmental toxins such as air pollution, pesticides and herbicides, chemical additives in dog food, stress and genetic predisposition. The good news is that this type of cancer tends not to spread deeply into the body. The bad news is that it always has a lot of little tendrils and can easily reoccur if not completely removed.

Dr. Gervais recommended that we immediately have the tumor surgically removed, and we scheduled an appointment for the next day. Fortunately they do this type of surgery in-house at Pets Unlimited, so it was quite close and convenient. The doctor took a good chunk out of him (at least a 3-inch incision!) to ensure that the cancer was fully removed. The biopsy afterwards reconfirmed that it was indeed cancerous, and more specifically was neuro fibro sarcoma cancer. Even though they removed what seemed like a very big piece of our Westie, the distance from the end of the cancerous cells and the edge of the removed piece was just a few millimeters. After a miserable week wearing an e-collar and an infant's undershirt (Hanes size 2/3T if you ever need one for your Westie) to keep him from scratching the metal staples holding the wound together, Fritz made a quick recovery and returned to his usual energy level. However, Dr. Gervais had suggested we talk to an

oncology specialist to understand the details of the biopsy and possibly consider follow-up treatment, so we met with Dr. Carlos Rodriguez of San Francisco Veterinary Specialists in Potrero Hill the following week.



Fritz after surgery with e-collar and t-shirt

Being a new veterinary office for Fritz, he was relatively calm and happy ... for about ten minutes. He soon figured out the nature of the office (other scared dogs?, medicinal smells?), and he started shaking like a leaf again. After a lengthy discussion, the doctor suggested strongly that Fritz receive radiation treatment given the small margins and the fact that this type of cancer has a tendency to reappear if not eliminated completely. If it does reappear, then he would need to have a deeper surgery next time, removing part of his stomach wall, and would surely need radiation therapy afterwards. On the other hand, because his cancer was of the lowest grade, we could be almost completely sure of it never coming back if we did radiation now. We were also reassured that radiation would not be painful for Fritz, so we decided not to take any chances and to proceed with it. Unfortunately, there are only three places in Northern California that do radiation therapy, and none of them are in the Bay Area. Next stop was the University of California at Davis, where we met with Dr. David Lurie, a radiation oncologist.

UC Davis is well-known as the best veterinary school in California, perhaps even in the nation, and they have an entire building devoted to small animals with cancer. Davis is a 1.5 hour drive from San Francisco when traffic is moving well (not often the case), and we discovered we would have to be there every day for the next four weeks, a big commitment for both human and canine. There we learned that there are several types of radiation equipment to treat cancer. The university had just received a more sophisticated system which would have been better for

Fritz, but unfortunately they had not yet received a permit to operate it. The new equipment applies the radiation in short waves to ensure that the depth of radiation doesn't impact internal organs no matter what the angle. This was important for Fritz because, with the tumor on his thorax, several internal organs could be in danger, particularly his lungs. So, depending on the analysis, we could either have had it done at UC Davis if they determined the rays could be angled so as not to damage his lungs, or we would need to travel to the University of Washington where they already have the new equipment in operation. We mentally prepared ourselves to go and live in Washington State for a month, but after x-rays and a CAT scan, the doctors created a computer model of Fritz and were able to confidently say they could treat him at UC Davis.

The treatment was to take 16 sessions of about one hour each, with a light general anesthetic each time. At first, Ineke thought she could drive back and forth from San Francisco every day but the four hours of driving was not only stressful for her, but Fritz realized quickly where he was going and trembled mightily all the way. After two days, we found a hotel in Davis (Best Western University Lodge) and negotiated a \$50 per night rate with no additional pet fee. The rate includes breakfast and a small gym (what a bargain!), and Davis is a cute little university town with an East Coast flavor, so we decided that Ineke and Fritz would stay near the school during the week.

Though Dr. Lurie said Fritz might start blistering with ulcerations halfway through the treatment, luckily that didn't happen. Apparently fair-skinned dogs like Westies tend to do worst in terms of ulcerations, but by the end he said that Fritz had done amongst the best of all the dogs he has treated. Fritz took it mostly in stride as he always does, though with a great deal of separation anxiety when he was dropped off at the hospital every morning. That never went away, and he was so happy to see Ineke everyday at noon that we were glad Ineke was staying with him during the week. About half of the canine cancer patients end up boarding at the university and we think it would probably add to their stress to be separated from their packs for such a long time.

The worst part for Fritz was wearing a catheter on one of his front legs everyday during the week. The doctors don't like to replace them everyday (too many needle holes), so they keep the catheter in and bandage it up. Fritz found this very uncomfortable and minimized the amount he would walk. Ineke had to watch over him vigilantly to make sure he didn't bite off the catheter (okay, he did just once). It was also distressing for us to see Fritz in discomfort. However, when he had the catheter removed before each weekend, he quickly returned to his old energetic self. Radiation is clearly much easier on a dog than chemotherapy.



Fritz searching for Christmas Presents

After the completion of treatment, we were told that Fritz's skin would get worse in the coming days because cells would continue to die off. That was indeed the case, with Fritz finally getting a large open sore centered around the scar of the surgical incision. The worst point seemed to be about seven days after the end of radiation, and then it slowly healed. His energy level was very good, and we had a very happy Christmas. Fritz got lots of presents this year from all of his concerned admirers, mostly toys of all kinds, which he absolutely loves. He mysteriously knows how to unwrap gifts, a skill he must have acquired before we adopted him at age five.



Resting in his window after completing radiation therapy

There were two side effects of the medicine Fritz was taking (Prednisone, an anti-inflammatory, and Cephalexin, an antibiotic). First, he was very hungry, and started coming into the kitchen after eating, asking for a second helping, not to mention frequent requests for snacks throughout the day. Unfortunately Ineke has a hard time resisting his pleading eyes, and he soon gained two

pounds. Second, is that he drank lots of water and needed to go to bathroom a lot. We weren't always alert enough, and he had a 7 or 8 accidents in the house. Fortunately, he somehow knew to go on the floor mat in the bathroom which made cleaning relatively easy.



Worst point of healing

We had follow-up visits with Dr. Lurie at UC Davis at the two-week, four-week and eight-week milestones. At the two-week visit, the sore had scabbed over completely, and Dr. Lurie said he was doing well. The inside area of the scab was still a little soft, and during the next week, Fritz started licking the soft area when we weren't watching, so it actually began to look a lot worse. So out came the e-collar, which Fritz seemed to realize was necessary to protect him from himself. Usually he puts up a fuss when we e-collar him, but now he resigned himself to it without resistance.

After a "visual" low point, he quickly started healing with flakes of scab coming off naturally. By the four-week visit to Dr. Lurie, half of the scab had fallen off. We were hoping to get Dr. Lurie's permission to give Fritz a bath, but he recommended we not bathe him until all of the scab was gone. Fritz is a soft-haired Westie who seems to need a weekly bath, and it had been over a month since he had his last one. Even Fritz realized he was getting smelly.

In the next few days, more of the scab came off (all over the house!). After several rainy days of chasing squirrels in the park, we decided the bath couldn't wait any longer, even though the scab wasn't fully gone. We decided we could work around it, and we did successfully. The whole pack was now really happy and smelling good! We started cutting back the medicine according to Dr. Lurie's schedule, and Fritz quickly lost a pound (one more to go to get back to his svelte physique ... hmm, okay, his "sturdy" physique).

I think we are ready to declare victory. It has been six weeks since the end of Fritz's radiation therapy as we write this. His scab has completely fallen off, revealing

new pink skin. Fritz is back to his old self: guarding the house, chasing squirrels and birds, thrashing his stuffed toys, etc. Today we took him to Ocean Beach, one of his favorite places, where he ran like the wind chasing an orange football.



Fritz is back! (Ocean Beach, Feb. 13, 2005)

Many thanks to everyone for their emails, cards, gifts, etc. We'll definitely be at the Westie Club's Spring Fling, and we hope to see you there!

Bill, Ineke and Fritz



Thanks for all the cards and gifts!

P.S. We now have a little challenge with the pet insurance company in obtaining all the benefits we should receive. Hopefully that will get sorted out. In general, we strongly recommend getting pet insurance. Our biggest regret is that we got the standard policy instead of the superior policy with cancer rider.