

## **WHAT IS A BOARD-CERTIFIED VETERINARY ONCOLOGIST?**

### **HOW TO BECOME A VETERINARIAN**

In the US, most people earn their veterinary degree following completion of a Bachelor's degree. Their major can be in any field, but there are specific pre-requisites for veterinary schools including biology, chemistry, biochemistry, physics, mathematics, and writing courses among many others. These are minimum requirements, and applicants frequently have advanced degrees including Master's or Doctorate level accolades following their name. Admission is competitive, and candidates possess intensely successful academic and co-curricular records.

Veterinary school is four years duration. During that time, student learn the fundamentals of anatomy, physiology, as well as pathophysiology of disease as it relates to form and function of several major species of animals. Upon graduation, and a passing score on a national licensing exam, newly minted veterinarians can enter into a variety of different working environments.

Graduates frequently enter small animal general practice. This equates to the veterinarian you're probably most familiar with when you think of the profession. General veterinarians regularly treat common (and uncommon) medical and surgical conditions of dogs and cats. On a typical day, they consult with owners on general wellness and preventative care, behavior issues, and disorders affecting numerous body systems. They interpret x-rays, perform dental cleanings, prescribe medications, and discuss nutrition. The breadth of their knowledge is vast, and the expectations from owners are high.

General veterinarians are comparable to primary care physicians; however, this is an oversimplification of the role they play in animal health. In truth, they are part internist, surgeon, radiologist, dentist, nutritionist, and psychologist (among others).

### **WHAT IS A VETERINARY SPECIALIST?**

While general veterinarians excel at many angles of veterinary medicine, there are times where more in-depth, specified care is necessary to achieve a diagnosis and/or impart a treatment plan. That is where veterinary specialists play a role in the care of complicated medical and surgical cases. It's akin to the treatment you would expect for yourself should your primary doctor refer you for more specialized care.

Veterinary specialists are veterinarians who have undertaken further training beyond their initial degree. For veterinary oncologists, this means they've completed at least one year in an internship in general medicine and surgery and emergency care, followed by a minimum of three years in a residency program focused solely on managing complex cancer cases.

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Many have also completed 1-2 additional years of specialty internship training in oncology and clinical trial design.

During a typical busy internship and residency program, a candidate typically sees between 25-35 oncology cases per week, affording them exposure to a huge variety of complex and routine cancer cases. This is far greater than the number they would see during a career working as a general practitioner. This intensive exposure provides them with accelerated experience diagnosing and treating complex cancer cases and provides a solid foundation for their future career.

To achieve board-certification there are several additional achievements candidates must accomplish beyond enduring their residency program. There are two rigorous examinations: one following the second year of residency training that focuses on general physiology and pathophysiology, and one following the third year that comprehensively tests all aspects of veterinary oncology, including principles of medical, radiation, and surgical cancer care. An additional component of this exam includes a working knowledge of several years' worth of research studies published in the same fields. In addition to passing scores on both exams, before obtaining board-certification, prospective oncologists must publish at least one original research project in a peer reviewed medical journal.

### **HOW DO I KNOW IF I NEED A VETERINARY ONCOLOGIST?**

Most veterinary oncologists operate on a referral basis, and some may require referral from a primary care veterinarian before agreeing to see a pet. Others will take self-referred cases; a common scenario for owners who may not be presented with the option of specialty care but discover the opportunity on their own. In most cases, there's a working partnership between the specialist and general veterinarian and there is a triad of care between the pet owner, the primary veterinarian, and the specialist. However, there are instances where poor communication on one or both side leads to a breakdown in care.

From a specialist's perspective, the most common negative outcome from the primary care side occurs when veterinarians do not offer referral out of presumption of an owner's financial capabilities or because of an inaccurate knowledge of treatment options and prognosis. Conversely, the most common complaint from referring veterinarians is a lack of disclosure and follow-up following referral, a particularly frustrating scenario for veterinarians who have been part of a pet's care for many years.

Some pet owners fear seeking a veterinary oncologist is akin to signing on to a treatment plan, and an expensive one at that. While it's true some aspects of specialty care can be costly, scheduling an appointment is a simple step towards discovering what options are available. Your veterinary oncologist will work with you to devise a treatment plan that works with your goals for your pet, and ensure it works within your budget. They often work in conjunction with your primary care veterinarian to provide the optimal level of care for your pet.

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