Can My Pet Get Sunburnt??

We live in a sunny country where we have all grown up with the catch phrase “slip, slop, slap” in our heads. This is because Australia has one of the highest rates of solar induced skin changes in the world. Unfortunately, our pets are not immune and those most at risk are those dogs and cats that bask in the sun for long periods of time. It can be direct sunlight, reflected sunlight and even indoors through windows.

What areas are affected?

- Hairless, finely haired or short haired areas
- Pale or unpigmented (pink/ white) skin
- Dependent on the preferred position for sunbaking
    - Those that like to lie on their backs will have belly and armpits affected
    - Those that lie on their side will have their flanks and sides of their bellies affected (next to the prepuce in boys) and the sides of the legs facing the sun
    - Generally, in front of their ears, ear tips (especially white cats) and the bridge of the nose

How does excessive sun exposure present clinically?

- Actinic Keratoses: red scaley areas of roughened skin often covering patches of skin. They may mimic allergic dermatitis in their appearance but tend to only be minimally itchy. On pathology, they appear as the precursors to squamous cell carcinoma (skin cancer).
- Raised red lumps: these may be benign hemangiomas or malignant hemangiosarcoma
- Solar dermatitis: acute, red and inflamed areas. This is like the acute sunburn we get from too much time in the sun without protection. Repeated episodes can lead to actinic keratoses.
- Recurrent deep bacterial pyoderma often seen as areas of pustules, nodules and draining tracts seen between areas of actinic keratosis or solar dermatitis
- Autoimmune diseases – some can be triggered by solar exposure e.g. discoid lupis erythematosus on the bridge of dogs' noses.

Treatment

Depending on the cause, treatment may include cryotherapy, surgery, antibiotics or topical therapies. A biopsy may be needed initially to obtain a diagnosis.

Prevention

- Removing sun exposure is the best long-term option. However, it should be remembered that previous solar damage may continue to produce lesions for 6-12 months after solar exposure is removed
- Sunsuits- there are several mail order companies that make custom made sun suits made from a similar material to human sun tops for swimming.
- Sunscreens designed for babies can be used but their effectiveness relies on committed reapplication – often every 3hours or as specified. Distraction techniques (e.g. walk, feeding, playing) must be employed to limit licking for at least 15minutes after application until the lotion is drawn into the skin surface.
  Avoid zinc creams as zinc can be toxic if consumed in large quantities.

If your pet has red inflamed, scaley or lumpy skin especially when involving unpigmented areas please don't ignore. Early attention can save a life. See your vet.