Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker, and today we’re going to discuss benign bumps you’re better off usually just leaving alone.

Dogs can produce a lot of lumps and bumps. Of course, I always recommend that you have new lumps and bumps produced in your dog’s body examined by your veterinarian. Many of them can be benign and there’s nothing to worry about. It is not an emergency situation when you find a new lump or bump; it’s when the new lump or bump begins growing or changing rapidly, we do recommend that you make an appointment sooner rather than later for your veterinarian to examine it.

Most veterinarians have body charts, which means they have drawings of the ventral or dorsal or front-to-back, side-to-side views of dogs, for us to be able to make notes as to what size the lump is when we first acknowledge it – is it growing or changing, what color is it, be able to measure it, and if we do a fine needle aspirate (which is sucking some cells out and sending to a pathologist for review), we can determine what specific cell type is there. We’ll also know whether it’s benign or malignant, or is it something to worry about, watch, or simply remove or take off.

In my practice, I have a pretty clear rule that we only remove cancerous tumors. Tumors can be benign or malignant, and my rule of thumb is this: if it’s cancerous and if the pathologist says there are spooky cells there, I highly recommend that we remove it now. If the pathologist says there’s nothing to worry about and it’s benign, I don’t recommend removing it, unless it interferes with the animal’s quality of life. Sometimes, benign tumors can interfere with an animal’s range of motion. Let’s say that there’s a lipoma or a fatty growth at the junction of a joint. Sometimes the animal ends up altering its gait to be able to ambulate. It shifts its body weight around, which causes compensatory changes. It those situations, it may behoove you to have a benign tumor removed.

However, across the board, I was taught in vet school that anytime you see any lump or bump, recommend removal because we make a profit – you’re happy, everyone’s happy. The downside is most of the time, lumps and bumps are benign and they shouldn’t, in my opinion, be removed unless there’s a medical reason. If the animal’s quality of life is impaired with a benign bump, we can remove it. If there’s a risk for the quality of life to become impaired, it’s something to think about removing it when the lump or bump is smaller rather than bigger.
Most importantly, if there are changes in pathology (which means it started out benign, but it grows and changes), I recommend that you have it reevaluated. If your pet has a lump that’s one by one centimeter, it’s been there for four and a half years, and all of a sudden you’re noticing that its four by four centimeters, it’s time to have the lump reevaluated. If the re-aspiration demonstrates that there’s a high mitotic cell division (cells are replicating faster) or that there are questionable cells, it’s a good time to consider having a questionable lump removed.

In all other situations and the majority of the time, removing bumps and lumps is cosmetic, which means owners don’t like how they look – bloody warts, for instance. They’re unsightly, or the groomer catches them with his comb or clipper. In those situations, my recommendation is leave them alone, point them out to the groomer, make sure your veterinarian is aware of them, make sure they’re measured, aspirated, and assessed correctly, written on a body chart with dates and sizes, and then just watch them. There’s really not a reason to remove a benign tumor in a dog, especially if it’s not growing or changing, other than there’s an economic benefit for veterinarians.

Sometimes, owners say “It just gives me the heebie-jeebies to pet a bloody wart.” I’ve had had a few instances where animals are under anesthesia for other situations, and I’ve had some clients say “I am unable to pet my dog because of that thing that’s growing on it, so please just take it off.” In those situations when animals are already under anesthesia for another reason, quickly removing a gross-looking or uncomfortable wart is something that is not a problem. The only other reason I will anesthetize patient specifically to remove a benign tumor – other than it’s growing rapidly, could impinge on range of motion or quality of life, and the animal is irritated by it – is when the animal can’t stop obsessing about it. Sometimes there are warts around toes, and once the dog realizes “I have a wart right here that’s really itchy,” it’ll keep licking and chewing, licking and chewing, to the point that all day long, he obsesses about the wart on his foot. If the wart’s benign, it kind of seems silly to remove it, other than when the dog’s obsessing about it, creating a bloody mess, and can’t have a great quality of life because it’s obsessing about its wart. It’s a good time to consider removing it.

Viral Papilloma

The first benign lump and bump we’re going to discuss are viral papillomas. Papilloma virus is a virus that creates warts. These warts are pretty characteristic-looking; they look like tiny lumps of cauliflower. They’re typically flesh-colored, but they can be pink, black, and pigmented as well. Papilloma, the fancy word for warts, comes about in dogs usually that have immune system imbalances, or an episode of immune system suppression. We see viral wart expression because all dogs are really exposed to the papilloma virus. It’s ubiquitous in the dog population.
All dogs have had exposure. Whether dogs express the virus or not really depends on their immune status.

In my practice, I use the expression of papillomas as a barometer of how a dog’s immune system is doing. If the dog’s immune system is thriving, usually there are very few warts that are expressed, and if they do become expressed, viral papillomas are the one type of wart that can actually resolve on its own.

It’s incredibly common for animals to begin exhibiting warts of viral origin as they age, and that’s one of the more common characteristics that I see in my practice. When dogs become 7, 8, or 9, they tend to express one or two warts. Part of the reason that I tend to not want to remove these warts is because I use them as a measurement of how an aging animal’s immune system is doing. If an animal’s immune system is vibrant and healthy, it should be able to recognize a no-big-deal wart virus and keep that virus from expressing itself.

The other issue with removing benign viral warts is not if they come back, it’s probably when. Let’s just say your veterinarian says that your dog has three warts – one on the back of the neck, one on the shoulder, and one on top of the head. That’s not a problem. The downside is, if you just can’t bear to deal with them and you have them removed, removing the three doesn’t remove the virus from your dog’s system. This means your dogs end up expressing that wart virus in three or four months’ time, and you say, “My gosh, there’s another one on its tail, and another one on its paw!” I don’t recommend removing them for that reason, because they may not come back in the same location, but they typically do return.

Older animals tend to begin expressing the wart virus, and I’ve had a lot of old dogs that end up with 60 warts. In my practice, we call them beauty marks because we’re not going to remove them. I do make note of them on the body chart, and we do work on improving the immune system viability. Of course, we don’t overvaccinate them in my practice, and I will tell you this: vaccines have been implicated in the expression of papilloma virus.

Dr. Pitcairn, who is the veterinarian I studied with for my homeopathic training, has absolutely noted a clear correlation, and I would say all holistic veterinarians have noted this correlation as well. The condition of vaccinosis, which is too much vaccine in your dog’s body, is one of the indicating factors of viral wart expression. This means when animals have a lot of vaccines, a negative reaction to a vaccine or when continued to be vaccinated unnecessarily, you can see warts pop up.

Here’s what’s interesting: the homeopathic treatment for warts is actually the same homeopathic treatment as the condition of vaccinosis. It’s all the same remedy, which is Thuja. The remedy that will help reduce viral wart expression is the same remedy used for vaccinosis. There’s a correlation there. So needless to say, reducing unnecessary vaccines is a nice first step
in reducing the potential of your dog expressing the wart virus (papillomatosis), as well as helping older animals that have already expressed that virus. Continuing to vaccinate can oftentimes bring out an additional round of warts.

The other thing I’d like to mention is that in young dogs, there can be an acute expression of the papilloma virus, which means there can be this amazing outburst of hundreds of warts, sometimes in the oral cavity of dogs. This acute expression of the papilloma virus is usually indicative of the animal’s weaker immune system. Although these warts typically resolve in three months on their own and don’t need a lot of treatment, they temporarily, dramatically reduce your dog’s quality of life. They have a hard time eating and drinking. Their whole oral cavity can be covered with warts.

It’s a virus, which means if those animals are in contact with other immunosuppressed animals... Keep in mind that the average dog at the dog park, in my opinion, is commonly immunosuppressed; they’re eating a trashy, dry food, overvaccinated, underexercised, and oftentimes they’re in environmentally stressful situations. Those dogs are at risk of picking up the active papilloma virus from an animal that has active lesions going on in its mouth. In those situations, animals that have oral papillomatosis should be kept quarantined or separate from animals that are not currently exhibiting symptoms.

It is well-assumed in the veterinary community that all dogs have had exposure to papilloma virus, so it’s just a matter of keeping your dog’s immune system up to speed with helping to reduce the expression of warts on your dog’s skin.