

Taking Care of Your Pet During Chemotherapy

The goal of chemotherapy is to kill cancer cells while maintaining a good quality of life for your pet. While dogs and cats generally tolerate chemotherapy well, much better than human cancer patients, if unexpected, severe side effects occur then the treatment plan will be changed (different drugs, doses or schedule) in order to provide a good quality of life for your pet.

Routine Monitoring

Most chemotherapeutic drugs have the potential to lower your pet's white blood cell and platelet counts, which makes them more susceptible to infection. In order to determine that the counts do not become too low, we may ask that your pet have a complete blood count (CBC) performed at certain times after treatment - typically 7-10 days after treatment but can vary based on the specific drug given. If the white blood cell count becomes low, we may prescribe an antibiotic as a precaution.

Mild Side Effects of Chemotherapy – Home Management

It is important to monitor your pet carefully, especially two to five days after treatment. As long as your pet is drinking normally and moderately active, then mild side effects can be managed at home. Examples of mild side effects may include occasional vomiting (usually considered less than three times per day), mild diarrhea, decreased or finicky appetite, and less energy than usual for several days after a treatment cycle. A bland diet such as rice, pasta, boiled chicken or hamburger, or low fat cottage cheese in small meals several times a day can be tried if the pet has an upset stomach. Encouraging your pet to lick ice chips and drink small amounts of water several times a day, rather than drinking a whole bowl of water at one time, may also help. There are oral medications for vomiting and diarrhea that can be prescribed as well. We encourage you to call us for recommendations if you have any concerns.

More Severe Side Effects – Veterinary Care Recommended

In a small percentage of pets, side effects of chemotherapy are more severe and can even become life threatening. A veterinarian should examine your pet when side effects include: severe vomiting or diarrhea – especially that persist for a day or more; profound lack of energy and decreased activity; and, fever of greater than 103° (rectally). If more fluid is leaving your pet (through vomiting or diarrhea) than your pet is taking in (through drinking/food), then your pet can become dehydrated and require intravenous fluids. Dry or sticky gums or loss of skin elasticity are signs of dehydration. If your pet develops a low white blood cell count and/or an infection, intravenous antibiotics and fluids may be required until the infection is controlled and/or the blood count improves.

Chemotherapy – protect the people around your pet

Most chemotherapeutic drugs are harmful to normal cells as well as cancer cells. Human exposure to the drugs should be minimized. With common sense, the risk of exposure to these drugs can be minimized. It is important to know that it is safe for your pet to be around people and other animals following treatment.

Many chemotherapy agents are eliminated from the pet's body in urine or feces. To minimize human exposure, encourage your pet to urinate and defecate on well drained surfaces such as grass. Wear gloves when picking up pet waste. If your pet urinates or defecates on bedding, you should wash it separately from other items in warm water. If your pet vomits after administration of oral medications, be sure to wear gloves when cleaning up and wash your hands well after cleaning.

If you are giving your pet oral chemotherapy at home, such as cyclophosphamide (Cytoxan), Chlorambucil (Leukeran) or CCNU (Lomustine), be sure to wear gloves and wash your hands well after handling the drug. You should **NEVER** open capsules, crush or split tablets in order to administer them to your pet. Pregnant women and children should not handle or administer the medications to pets.