



What to Expect: Oncology

Will my pet get sick after chemotherapy administration? If so, when should I expect my pet to have potential side effects after chemo?

The majority of animal chemotherapy patients have minimal to no side effects due to differences in treatment from humans. Rare side effects include gastrointestinal signs (poor appetite, vomiting, diarrhea) within 3-4 days, often treatable with medication. Preventive medications are given to avoid these types of side effects. Another rare side effect is bone marrow suppression, expected around day 7 after chemo. We carefully monitor white blood cell levels through a CBC to find the right balance of treatment. If levels are too low, we start antibiotics and adjust the chemo dose to prevent severe dips.

What is the difference between cancer treatment in animals and humans?

Human treatment is generally aggressive and prioritizes a full cure or survival beyond 5-10 years at the expense of their quality of life. In contrast, for animals, the focus is on maximizing their survival time while maintaining a good quality of life, due to their shorter life spans and unique environment and lifestyle. Unlike humans, animals' behaviors and interactions expose them to potential infections, so chemotherapy must be carefully balanced to treat their condition without suppressing their immune system excessively. Thus, lower doses are used in animals to improve symptoms and extend both quantity and quality time.

Will chemotherapy make my pet's hair fall out?

In general, only hair that continuously grows is affected by chemotherapy. Breeds that need grooming to prevent overgrown appearance (Poodles, Shih Tzus, Sheepdogs, Maltese, etc.) are more likely to experience hair loss. Breeds with short fur that doesn't grow significantly (Labs, Hounds, Frenchies, Bulldogs, etc.) should not experience significant hair loss. However, they may take longer to regrow shaved sites, and they may lose selective continuously growing hairs (whiskers, eyebrows, leg feathers), which will regrow after chemotherapy is completed.

Can I still give my pet flea/tick/heartworm prevention while undergoing cancer treatment?

YES! Please continue these preventive measures, as heartworm disease is extremely prevalent in South Carolina, even in the winter months!

Can I vaccinate my pet while undergoing cancer treatment?

For **IMMUNE SYSTEM** cancers (lymphoma/leukemia, multiple myeloma, histiocytic sarcoma, and mast cell tumor), we would prefer to avoid ALL vaccines. For **ALL OTHER CANCERS**, we would prefer to keep vaccines to a minimum. Speak with your pet's oncologist for specific recommendations.

Will my pet's urine or feces make me or my family/other pets sick?

Immediate illness after exposure to these residues is highly unlikely. The greatest concern with chemo exposure is REPEATED exposure over extended periods (weeks/months/years), which may lead to cancer development in 10-20 years. Thus, the highest risk is to the HUMANS in the household who are more likely to experience long-term side effects.

What can I do to minimize chemo exposure in my household?

- Wear gloves when cleaning contaminated body secretions (urine, feces, vomit, litter box).
- Chemotherapy patients should not eliminate outdoors in areas where small children play (e.g., sandbox) while their urine/feces are contaminated (usually within the first 72 hours).
- Promptly remove contaminated feces from outdoor areas.
- Scoop cat litter boxes daily (preferably using clumpable litter) and change them frequently. Wash the pan with detergent. Cats can share the same litter box.
- Young children, immunosuppressed individuals, or pregnant women should avoid exposure to contaminated body secretions.

I have to give my pet oral chemotherapy. What can I do to keep myself and my family safe from exposure?

- Store chemotherapy drugs away from children.
- Oral chemotherapy should be administered wearing gloves, either in a small piece of food or directly down the throat.
- **IMPORTANT:** Do not break the chemotherapy tablets, open capsules, or dissolve them in water.
- Avoid allowing your pet to chew on chemotherapy pills because there is a higher risk of exposure when the powder is released from the tablet or capsule.
- Oral chemo is generally absorbed within 2 hours. If vomiting occurs during that time, the vomit is considered contaminated and you should wear gloves to clean it. Depending on the timing of the vomiting, all or part of the medication may not be absorbed. Unless the vomiting happened within 15 minutes of chemo administration, giving another dose is usually not recommended. Please call us if this occurs.

Can I kiss my dog after chemo? Can my dog kiss me?

If your pet received an ORAL chemo drug, it's safest to avoid kissing them for that day (in case any residual drug powder is in or around their mouth).

My pet isn't nauseated because he/she isn't vomiting, so I'm not going to give the anti-nausea medication that was prescribed.

Nausea comes in MANY forms: poor appetite, drooling, lip smacking and even gagging. Vomiting is the most extreme form of nausea but it is important to detect other symptoms of nausea so we can intervene earlier.

My pet hasn't defecated in several days, is this worrisome?

This is such a common question! If your pet is acting normally (energy, appetite, etc.) then there is nothing to do differently. If your pet is going outside and visibly straining or attempting to defecate without producing any feces, then please contact us to let us know.

My pet isn't in pain because he isn't crying so I'm not going to give the pain medication that was prescribed.

Pain comes in MANY forms: limping, poor appetite, licking at the area, lethargy, chattering teeth, etc., and it's important to recognize these because most animals will not "cry" when they're in pain. MOST cancers are not necessarily painful, though there are a few exceptions (bone cancer being the main cancer that causes pain). If you have any concerns that your pet is in pain, please give the prescribed pain medications or contact us for additional medications to help manage pain.

Can I feed my pet on the morning of chemotherapy?

In most cases, YES. It is very rare that we need to sedate patients for chemotherapy but if this has been discussed with you by the doctor, then it is best NOT to feed the morning of chemotherapy. Otherwise, yes, please give your pet breakfast AND their medications (if any) as usual on the morning of their chemotherapy visit.



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