

Chemotherapy in Cats and Dogs

What is chemotherapy?

The use of a drug or chemical to treat any illness is chemotherapy, but this term is commonly used to refer to the use of drugs in the treatment of cancer. The goals of chemotherapy in dogs and cats are to improve quality of life and extend life expectancy.

How does chemotherapy work?

Cancer occurs when cells grow/divide rapidly in an uncontrolled way. Chemotherapy drugs act by blocking cell growth and division. There are different drugs that act on different stages of this process. It is often best to use a combination of these drugs to kill cancer cells effectively, whilst minimising possible side effects.

Chemotherapy drugs are often given by injection, but some are available as tablets to give by mouth.

How long will treatment last?

The length of time that treatment lasts and the frequency of treatment depends on the type of cancer being treated and how well the patient tolerates the treatment. Many types of cancer require weekly treatment, but some types may only require treatment every 3-4 weeks.

Will my pet experience side effects?

We do not use as high chemotherapy doses in pets as are used in people and we do not expect to see the severe side effects that we associate with chemotherapy in people. Pets may experience side effects but these are generally mild and either resolve spontaneously or with minimal treatment. The clinician looking after your pet will always try to choose the combination of drugs that will cause the fewest side effects, whilst being the most effective. The aim is that the pet should feel as well as possible and most patients do not seem to feel unwell at all whilst receiving chemotherapy. The potential for drug related side effects must always be balanced against the benefit of the chemotherapy and the consequences of the cancer itself.

The most commonly seen side effects are reduced appetite, vomiting, diarrhoea, infection and thin hair-coat. Most commonly your pet may just seem to be a bit 'off-colour' for a day or two. Unfortunately there is no way of predicting how well each patient will tolerate chemotherapy and all animals receiving this type of treatment must be monitored closely and taken to the vet at any sign of ill-health.

Are there any risks to me or my family?

Most chemotherapy drugs are very potent and must be handled with care. Some drugs are 'carcinogens', i.e. they can actually cause cancer with prolonged exposure. With tablets it is very important that they are kept out of reach of children and other pets, in childproof containers. Latex gloves should be worn to handle these medications and they should never be crushed, cut or split. With all forms of chemotherapy the urine, faeces and vomit of animals being treated can be contaminated. Contact with urine and faeces should therefore be avoided where possible for 3-4 days after each treatment. Gloves should be worn to clean out cat litter trays or to deal with any accidents. If the animal uses the garden and there are young children who have access to the garden then the faeces should be collected (wearing gloves) and double-bagged and taken to your own vet for disposal.

If tablets accidentally become damaged, or are spat out, or vomited up, then the affected area and any remnants should be cleaned as follows: wearing gloves and a facial dust mask use a dampened disposable absorbent towel to mop away solid/liquid waste, then sweep or vacuum the area and then wash 3 times with a detergent. The waste should be double plastic bagged and taken to your vet for safe disposal. Any left-over tablets should also be returned to your vet.

This information sheet has been adapted from a client information sheet by Kraegel in Ettinger's Textbook of Veterinary Internal Medicine, 5th edition



We are a multidisciplinary specialist referral practice for cats & dogs, near Winchester, Hampshire

t 01962 767920 e info@andersonmoores.com w www.andersonmoores.com