

# Information on Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can be an excellent treatment option that can increase the life of your pet whilst still maintaining quality of life, compared with no treatment at all.

Chemotherapy drugs are designed to kill rapidly dividing cells, such as cancer cells. Compared to people who receive chemotherapy, pet animals experience fewer and less severe side effects because we use lower doses of drugs.

## Protocols

Formulating a treatment plan depends on firstly the specific type of cancer your pet may have and this will determine the necessary drug programme they need, the dose and schedule used. Some drugs are given orally and can be administered at home however, most are administered intravenously (through the patients veins) requiring them to be admitted and spend some time with your veterinary practice. In some cases weekly blood tests are needed to monitor the effects of the chemotherapy before additional treatments are given.



In some cases animals may need to receive chemotherapy drugs throughout their lives but in others treatment may be spread out or discontinued after a period of weeks to months if the cancer appears to be in remission, i.e., there is no detectable evidence of cancer in the body. Chemotherapy may resume if the cancer relapses.

## Side Effects

There are many different types of chemotherapy agents currently available and each individual agent has a different likelihood of causing possible side effects. These commonly potential side effects can include:

**Gastrointestinal signs;** for example anorexia, vomiting and/or diarrhoea. These signs usually are not severe or prolonged and are not seen on the day of treatment but often occur three to five days later. Anti-emetic's (anti-nausea/vomiting medication) can be given to help.

**Alopecia;** pets rarely have dramatic hair loss but some undergo changes in coat condition where the coat can develop into a soft fluffy coat, especially in certain breeds like Poodles or English Sheepdogs. Cats however more often than not lose their whiskers.

**Myelosuppression;** many Cytotoxic drugs impair the bone marrows ability to produce cells. Low White Blood Cell Counts can occur which is not dangerous in itself but can result in the inability to fight infections. We take blood tests before each chemotherapy treatment and treatment may need to be delayed and antibiotics prescribed to reduce the patient's risk of infection if this occurs.

## Safety Concerns

You are in no danger living with an animal having chemotherapy but there are precautions that should be taken.

Some drugs are excreted in the urine, faeces and saliva of our patients. Most drugs are inactivated in the body, but some remain active in the urine and faeces. Most of the drug is eliminated after two to seven days.

**Under no circumstances should pregnant or breast-feeding women or young children handle urine, faeces or anti-cancer medication of animals being treated with chemotherapy drugs.** If possible you should leave the faeces for 48 hours outside as UV light breaks down the drug. If urine or faeces does need to be cleaned up, wear gloves and use dilute bleach. When giving any medication prescribed to your pet we would recommend wearing gloves at all times and no tablets should ever be split or crushed.

If tablets accidentally become damaged, spat out or vomited up then the affected area and any remnant should be cleaned as follows; Wearing gloves and a facial dust mask use a damp disposable, absorbent towel to mop away solid/liquid waste. Then sweep or vacuum the area and then wash three times with a detergent. The waste should then be double plastic bagged and taken to your vets for safe disposal. If you have any left over tablets they should always be returned to your local veterinary practice for safe disposal.

Unfortunately it cannot be predicted how well each individual patient will tolerate chemotherapy so it is important to watch your pet closely after treatment has been given and contact us immediately on 01793 522483 if you have any concerns or questions.