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Advice for owners with pets undergoing chemotherapy

Although cancers in animals are often treated surgically, sometimes medicines can be more appropriate, either alone, or in conjunction with an operation. Chemotherapy is used to treat a number of cancers, and usually involves a number of medications (a mix of tablets and injections) being administered according to special protocols. Injections will always be required to be administered at the veterinary practice. Some of the tablets may require administration by yourself, if you feel comfortable and confident in doing this. Unfortunately, apart from their effect on the cancer, these drugs have some disadvantages, which are important for you to appreciate before committing to a course of chemotherapy.

Side-effects

Although we will try to do everything we can to avoid side-effects, some animals can still suffer problems during treatment, most frequently vomiting, diarrhoea and an increased susceptibility to infections, although this happens less often than described in humans. The hair loss which is so noticeable in humans undergoing chemotherapy is much less common and marked in animals. If your pet shows any abnormal behaviour or signs, please contact us immediately. To try to detect any infection, or an increased risk of infection as early as possible, your vet will recommend regular blood sampling prior to administering chemotherapeutic drugs to hopefully detect such problems developing at an early stage. It is sometimes necessary for your vet then to change the frequency and/or the type of drug that is due to be administered.

Environmental hazards

Although cytotoxic drugs are used to treat cancers, many of them can also *cause* cancers. It is therefore important to avoid direct contact with these drugs. All excreta (vomit, urine, faeces, saliva) may contain some of the drugs after administration. You must therefore be prepared to take care of all excreta during certain time periods; depending on your vet's choice of drugs this will be for different periods of time following drug administration.

For cats, this requires daily cleaning of the litter tray, using disposable plastic bags in the box and wearing disposable gloves. All contaminated waste must be kept separate and double-bagged prior to disposal.

For dogs, during the risk period you must keep him/her on the lead at all times when outside, remove all faeces with plastic bags (double-bag) using disposable gloves and rinse off/dilute all urine with water. You can dispose of the faeces by flushing it in the toilet or discarding it into a designated rubbish bin. The resting place of your pet should be checked daily and sanitised after each risk period by washing all clothes slept on and rinsing all surfaces of sleeping places.

Importantly, avoid being licked by your pet.

Children and pregnant women are particularly sensitive to the carcinogenic effects of chemotherapy drugs. In this situation, contact with the pet should be avoided if at all possible.

Costs

Chemotherapy drugs are expensive and require close monitoring and frequent blood sampling tests which incur additional costs. Your vet can work you out an estimate of initial costs but the long term commitment to treatment should be appreciated prior to commencing chemotherapy.

Special advice for administration of medication at home

- Administer the drug only at the dose prescribed by your veterinarian. If you make a mistake, please contact us immediately for advice
- Prevent direct contact of the drug with your skin. Use disposable gloves for the administration of the drugs and carefully wash your hands afterwards. You must not crush any of the drugs prescribed
- Part of the drug will be excreted by your pet in the saliva, urine, faeces or vomit. Take care that the animal does not urinate or defecate in the area of playing children
- If vomit, urine, faeces or blood is spilled in your house, take immediate precautions. Use disposable gloves to remove the contaminated material with disposable absorbent material and carefully wash your hands afterwards.
- Avoid close contact with your pet, particularly avoiding being licked. This is particularly important during the time of immediate excretion of the drug following administration, normally for 3 -5 days.
- Keep all drugs in their original packet outside the reach of children and pets
- Remnants of the drug that are not used should be brought back to your vet.