

Chemotherapy in Pets



The use of chemotherapy in pets with cancer has risen dramatically over the past several years.

When deciding whether to treat a pet with chemotherapy it is important to consider the potential benefits as well as risks associated with such therapy. It is also important to understand the similarities and differences between chemotherapy in pets compared to what is commonly seen in people.

Chemotherapy can be used in many ways. It can be used as a sole treatment for certain cancers such as lymphoma, but more commonly, it is used in conjunction with other treatment modalities such as surgery and/or radiation therapy. Most chemotherapy protocols for pets have a finite treatment schedule, with the majority of drugs following a once every 2-3 week schedule for 4-8 treatments. An exception to this generalization is the treatment of lymphoma, which employs weekly chemotherapy treatments often exceeding 12 total treatments. Ultimately, the type of cancer being treated and the overall goal of therapy dictate the recommended chemotherapy protocol and treatment duration.

Regardless of the setting, the ultimate goal of any cancer treatment, including chemotherapy, is to provide control of the cancer while limiting side effects. In order to fulfill this goal of keeping pets feeling well while undergoing therapy, the dose and scheduling of chemotherapy for pets is in general less aggressive than those used in human oncology. As a result, the veterinary experience with chemotherapy is often much better than that seen in human oncology.

Most pets will tolerate chemotherapy well and have minimal side effects. Mild, often self-limiting side effects such as nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, diarrhea, and tiredness occurs in roughly 20% of patients treated with chemotherapy. Serious side effects are seen in <5% of the patients treated. Examples of serious side effects include prolonged nausea, vomiting or diarrhea requiring hospitalization and/or fluid support. Other rare risks include infection and bleeding secondary to bone marrow suppression. Fatality associated with chemotherapy is very rare, occurring in <1% of patients treated. Hair loss or slow hair growth may occur in certain instances but is also rare and for the most part, limited to specific dog breeds with continually growing hair coats and non-shedding breeds such as poodles. If side effects occur, depending on their severity, changes in drug dose or type are employed. Additionally, chemotherapy can be discontinued at any time if the side effects are not desirable.

Chemotherapy can come in many forms, but the most common agents are usually formulated as either a liquid for IV injection or as a pill for at home oral administration. Injectable chemotherapies in pets are often administered as a rapid intravenous or “bolus” through a catheter placed immediately prior to administration. The treatments are relatively painless and most pets sit quietly without the need for sedation during the catheter placement and treatment process. Oral chemotherapies can either be administered in the hospital or at home. When administering oral chemotherapy at home, gloves should be worn at all times when handling the drug, and pills should never be split.

Regardless of how the drug is administered, certain precautions are necessary when handling pets (and their waste) after chemotherapy has been administered. Specifically, one should not directly handle feces, urine or vomitus unless absolutely necessary within 24 hours of the chemo administration. If a pet has an “accident,” gloves should be worn and the area should be cleaned with disposable items (paper towels, baby diapers, etc.) that are discarded after use. Hands should then be washed thoroughly when finished cleaning. If non-disposable items are soiled by feces, urine or vomitus within 24 hours of chemotherapy administration, these items should be washed twice before subsequent use. If any questions arise regarding how to handle your pet or soiled materials, please contact us.

Cancers are often initially very sensitive to chemotherapy drugs and shrink tumors dramatically, often with hours or days. Unfortunately, the cancer may return weeks, months or even years later despite drug treatment. In such cases, the cancer cells have become resistant to the chemotherapy drugs in a similar way bacteria become resistant to antibiotic therapy. When resistance to one drug occurs, we can often use another drug to achieve the desired effect. However, each time resistance develops to one drug, it becomes more difficult to find a drug that the cancer will respond to.

In all cases, we will determine the specific treatment that serves your pet and your situation. If you have questions regarding specific chemotherapy agents used to treat pets with cancer, please feel free to contact us at 303-678-8844 or email jperry@aspenmeadowvet.com.