



NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF ONCOLOGY

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CHEMOTHERAPY SIDE EFFECTS - FAQ

The treatment of cancer among companion animals is becoming increasingly common. Often, fear of chemotherapy will prevent some animals from receiving treatment for very treatable diseases. The following is a list of frequently asked questions to help educate our clients about what they can expect with chemotherapy treatments.

Do pets commonly become sick or even die from chemotherapy treatments?

Very few animals become ill while receiving chemotherapy. About 5% of animals will experience side effects. Having an animal die from chemotherapy is exceeding rare (less than 1%) and is usually from the development of sepsis.

Is the experience for pets the same as for people receiving chemotherapy?

NO! This fact needs to be made clear. In people the goal of treatment is cure, while for animals it is usually management. People receive chemotherapy at higher doses, more frequently and with lower WBC counts than do dogs and cats. This places people at significant risk for the development of side effects. This is a level of risk not taken in veterinary oncology.

What are the most common side effects of chemotherapy? Chemotherapy attacks rapidly dividing cells. The cell populations of interest are the cancer cells, cells of the GI tract, the bone marrow, hair follicles and reproductive cells. We are happy to be rid of the cancer cells. GI side effects are the most commonly noted chemotherapy side effects. We can see vomiting, diarrhea, and loss of appetite or some combination. Bone marrow suppression usually happens 7 to 10 days after treatment. A low WBC count may be an incidental finding or may be associated with illness, though this is uncommon. Hair loss in cats is rare and seen most commonly only in dogs with continuously growing coats, though many dogs will lose their course overcoat and develop a fine "puppy coat". Usually reproductive cells are not an issue, but intact animals should not be bred.

When side effects happen, when do they start and how long do they last? The onset is usually 3 to 5 days after the chemotherapy treatment and in most cases the effects are self limiting and resolve in a day. I tell owners to worry if they see more than 2 episodes of vomiting or diarrhea or more than one day loss of appetite.

What happens if side effects occur? Owners should contact the attending veterinarian. I always take the temperature (remembering that animals with very low WBC counts will be unable to mount a fever) and a CBC. Vomiting and diarrhea can be managed by dietary changes, anti-nausea or anti-diarrhea medications. Though rarely seen, animals with very low WBC counts may require hospitalization for IV fluids and IV antibiotics. The average hospitalization is 2 days. In very rare circumstances the bone marrow may require hormone support.

DR. KEVIN FINORA IS A BOARD CERTIFIED ONCOLOGIST AND SMALL ANIMAL INTERNIST. HE SEES PATIENTS WEDNESDAY (INCLUDING EVENINGS) TO SATURDAY AT VEC/RC SOUTH. PLEASE DO NOT HESITATE TO CONTACT DR. FINORA IF YOU HAVE ANY CANCER RELATED QUESTIONS.

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