

Chemotherapy in Veterinary Medicine

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The word “chemotherapy” literally means “drug therapy”. Most commonly this type of treatment is associated with cancer therapy. Just as in people, chemotherapy is a common effective treatment for cancer in dogs and cats. Unlike the human experience, however, drug therapy for animal patients is generally very well tolerated. In fact, many people are very surprised at how well their companions feel and act while receiving chemotherapy. This handout reviews the general aspects of chemotherapy for veterinary patients treated at our hospital.

Chemotherapy Appointments

It is important to make an appointment for each chemotherapy administration through the receptionist. These are typically outpatient appointments, and the duration of each appointment varies according to the drug being administered. Generally patients are here with us from 45-90 minutes. When you arrive at the hospital, you will be asked how your pet has been doing since the last visit. ***If you have any concerns about your companion, please let the receptionist or technician know. You always have the opportunity to speak with Dr. Glawe prior to your pet’s evaluation.*** During this time, Dr. Glawe performs a physical exam and a complete blood count is drawn. Once the blood cell counts have been confirmed to be normal, your pet will receive the scheduled chemotherapy for that visit. If any problems with the blood count are noted, we generally recommend not to administer chemotherapy that day and to have your pet return to us in one week for another blood test.

Once the chemotherapy administration is complete, your pet will be able to return home and return to normal activity. There is no reason to isolate your companion or worry about exposure to your family or other animals in your home. Your pet may have a small band-aid in the area where the injection was administered, which can be removed once you arrive home.

Side Effects

Practically all anti-cancer drugs have side effects. In general, the dosages and frequency of administration for veterinary chemotherapy treatments are much less intensive than those in humans. This is one of the reasons most animal patients do not experience significant adverse effects. There is always the possibility that side effects can occur and our goal is to make you aware of these.

Alopecia (hair loss): Pets rarely lose their hair with chemotherapy. Generally, this is a breed-related issue. Dogs whose hair grows continually, or that must be groomed have thinning of the hair coat associated with treatment. Cats can lose their whiskers.

Decreased Cell counts (neutropenia, thrombocytopenia): Chemotherapy kills rapidly growing cells. The patient's bone marrow makes white blood cells and platelets that replenish rapidly, so these innocent by-standers are decreased with each dose of chemotherapy. The good news is that the bone marrow compensates very well and will continue to replenish these, despite chemotherapy. However low white cell and platelet counts can impair your pet's ability to fight off infection and clot his/her blood appropriately. A CBC blood test is performed to assess these counts and determine if chemotherapy can be administered, or if antibiotics are necessary to prevent infection.

Gastrointestinal Discomfort: Nausea and soft stool can be associated with certain types of chemotherapy agents. When these specific agents are administered, we generally recommend that you administer oral medications at home preventatively to avoid any problems. Most patients do not experience any problems, however, please review the list below so that you are prepared:

- 1) nausea: Monitor your pet for drooling, smacking of the lips, loss of appetite. Administer the anti-nausea oral medications as directed; feed only small meals instead of one large meal. If these signs persist, call the hospital.
- 2) vomiting: After a vomiting episode, do not feed your pet for 12 hours. Offer small amounts of water every 2-3 hours and do not allow them to drink a large quantity at once, as this can induce nausea. Call if the vomiting persists for more than 12 hours.
- 3) loss of appetite: continue to administer the anti-nausea medication, and do not hesitate to offer small amounts of home cooked food every 4-6 hours. Warm chicken or beef broth, cooked rice/pasta/potatoes, scrambled eggs, cottage cheese are all acceptable alternatives.
- 4) soft stool: Generally occurs 2-5 days after chemotherapy administration, if it is to occur at all. Add home cooked foods that are high in fiber to your pet's diet, such as cooked rice, oatmeal, canned pumpkin to each meal. If diarrhea or fresh blood develops in the stool, please call the hospital. Oral antibiotic therapy may be necessary.

Summary

We work as a team to ensure that your pet experiences a smooth treatment protocol with chemotherapy. Our ultimate goal is to extend your pet's life and maintain an excellent quality of life. If at any time you are concerned about your companion's condition or have questions about your experience with treatment, please notify us.