

Chemotherapy fact sheet

A diagnosis of cancer in a loved pet is a worrying time and there can be a lot of questions regarding treatment. Our top priority at Wear Referrals is to maintain quality of life in all our patients, and we would never recommend a treatment that we thought would cause undue suffering. This leaflet answers some of the commonly asked questions regarding chemotherapy.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy means “treatment with drugs”. It is often used in the treatment of cancer, along with other therapies such as surgery and radiotherapy.

Many cancers can be treated with chemotherapy. For some cancers (particularly *lymphoma*), chemotherapy is the primary treatment for the disease. For other cancers, chemotherapy can follow surgery to reduce or prevent further tumour growth.

There are many different types of chemotherapy. Some involve trips to the hospital for injections or infusions, whereas others are tablet based which are given at home. The oncologist will discuss which type of chemotherapy is right for your pet.

How will chemotherapy affect my pet?

The most important concern for a veterinary oncologist is to maintain or improve quality of life in our patients. We therefore try everything possible to minimise the risk of side effects in patients that are receiving chemotherapy. There can be some individual variation in the response to chemotherapy drugs, and we should be prepared for some side effects that are common to all chemotherapy drugs:

- Stomach upsets – most commonly mild sickness, diarrhoea or reduced appetite. These effects commonly occur around 3-5 days following treatment. We make sure that owners have a supply of anti-sickness medication at home.
- Bone marrow suppression – this can cause a low white blood cell count, which may make the patient more susceptible to infection. This rarely causes a clinical problem, and we perform regular blood tests to monitor for this.
- Lethargy – one of the most reported side effects in people is lethargy, and we can see this in our patients as well. Normally it lasts for 24-48 hours after the chemotherapy.

Chemotherapy side effects happen in predictable way and are normally at their worst 3-7 days after a treatment. If side effects do occur, then we can alter the chemotherapy protocol so that they do not happen again. We can also work with your local vet to prescribe treatments to help any side effects should they occur.

Animals will very rarely lose hair when they are receiving chemotherapy, although it can result in a delay of hair regrowth. The only exception are poodles and related cross breeds, who can temporarily lose some hair, typically around the head and neck.

What does chemotherapy involve?

If your pet is due to receive chemotherapy at the hospital this will happen usually on a Tuesday or Thursday. This is an outpatient clinic, and each visit should last around 2-3 hours. It is very rare that patients will require sedation to receive chemotherapy. Please check with your oncologist whether this will be the case.

On each treatment day, before receiving chemotherapy, your pet's progress is discussed together with a full physical examination and blood tests. Following this assessment, chemotherapy doses are calculated and the drugs administered either intravenously (into a vein) via a catheter, subcutaneously (under the skin) or orally.

Are there any risks to me?

Generally the risks to human health are very small. Chemotherapy agents can be excreted in the urine and faeces and care must be taken when handling waste. Pregnant women, or those of any gender who are attempting to conceive, should not be in contact with the patient's waste. If your pet has been prescribed chemotherapy tablets to be given at home then gloves should be worn to handle them. Tablets should never be crushed, and capsules should not be opened.

The oncologist will be able to discuss any risks with you if you are worried about this.

Can chemotherapy be given by my local veterinary practice?

Many vets in general practice are experienced in giving chemotherapy but this is an individual choice. Administering chemotherapy not only takes training but also the practice needs to have the correct equipment. Therefore, please check with your local vet if they are happy to give chemotherapy – we are happy to give advice on treatment protocols if necessary.

We will work closely with your local vet throughout your pet's treatment and we will keep them updated following every treatment.

What happens after chemotherapy?

This depends on that cancer that your pet has been diagnosed with. We may recommend follow up tests to make sure that the cancer stays in remission, which could involve scans or blood samples. Your consultant will discuss the plan with you towards the end of the chemotherapy protocol. Some of the follow up will be able to be carried out with your primary vet.