

Managing Chemotherapy Side Effects

How Common Are Chemotherapy Side Effects In Dogs And Cats?

Fortunately, chemotherapy side effects are uncommon in veterinary patients. On average, 85% of dogs and cats treated with chemotherapy maintain an excellent quality of life with minimal side effects. Approximately 15% of pets have side effects that require treatment and typically include mild symptoms that can be managed at home. Following chemotherapy treatment, symptomatic pets may display a few days of lethargy, reduced appetite, vomiting, or soft stools. In less than 5% of cases, side effects may be significant enough to require a short period of hospitalization for supportive care. Overall, most patients feel well while receiving chemotherapy.

How Do I Know If My Pet Is Experiencing Nausea? What Medications Treat Nausea?

In dogs and cats, signs of nausea can include drooling, reduced appetite, sniffing food and then walking away, refusal to eat certain foods, and vomiting. We typically send home oral anti-nausea medication after chemotherapy treatments so that you are prepared to treat any nausea you observe in your pet. Commonly prescribed anti-nausea medications include maropitant (Cerenia), ondansetron (Zofran), and metoclopramide (Reglan). If you notice that your pet is experiencing nausea, we recommend that you administer a dose of anti-nausea medication and continue to observe your pet closely to see if they require additional doses. For pets with several days of poor appetite, we may recommend an appetite stimulant such as mirtazapine (Remeron or Mirataz) or capromorelin (Entyce). If your pet does not eat over a period of 24 hours or has two or more episodes of vomiting, please contact our hospital so we can provide further guidance.



What Medications And Treatments Are Recommended For Diarrhea?

We commonly prescribe oral anti-diarrheal medications so that you are prepared to treat any soft stools or diarrhea your pet may develop following chemotherapy treatment. Anti-diarrheal medications include metronidazole (Flagyl), tylosin (Tylan), and loperamide (Imodium). In addition, non-prescription supplements can be beneficial for pets experiencing diarrhea. Probiotics are a source of healthy bacteria that can improve digestion. We recommend a product called Visbiome, as it contains the highest quantity of healthy bacteria compared to other probiotic products. Visbiome can be purchased online at visbiome.com or dispensed through MedVet.

- Recommendations for Visbiome capsules or packets
 - Cats and Dogs <20 lbs. – 1 capsule once daily or ¼ packet once daily
 - Dogs 20-60 lbs. – 2 capsules once daily or ½ packet once daily
 - Dogs >60 lbs. – 4 capsules once daily or 1 packet once daily

Another option to treat soft stools or diarrhea is to add a fiber supplement to your pet's diet. Fiber One Cereal is an excellent source of fiber, and you can purchase this cereal at any grocery store. Most dogs eat it eagerly, and the fiber helps to improve soft stools.

- Recommendations for Fiber One Cereal
 - Dogs <20 lbs. – ¼ cup once daily
 - Dogs 20-50 lbs. – ¼ cup twice daily
 - Dogs >50 lbs. – ½ cup twice daily



After A Chemotherapy Treatment, Will My Pet Need Antibiotics?

Antibiotics may be recommended for pets with a low white blood cell count due to chemotherapy. However, most dogs and cats do not require antibiotics after chemotherapy treatments, as significant drops in white blood cells are uncommon. To evaluate your pet's white blood cell count following their first treatment with a new chemotherapy drug, we will commonly recommend that they have a CBC (complete blood count) performed on a specific day after treatment (often seven days after chemotherapy treatment). The timing of this CBC is based on when a particular chemotherapy drug is most likely to cause the lowest drop in white blood cells ("nadir"). This blood test can be performed at MedVet or with your pet's general practitioner, with results forwarded to our oncology team for review.

What is a 'Treatment Delay'?

Prior to each chemotherapy treatment, we'll evaluate your pet's cell counts with a CBC (complete blood count). We are checking to make sure your pet has sufficient red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets to safely receive the next chemotherapy treatment. On rare occasions, your pet may have reductions in cell counts that require a treatment delay, in which we postpone the next chemotherapy treatment for 3-7 days. These drops in cell counts are secondary to bone marrow suppression from the prior chemotherapy treatment, and typically cell counts will normalize within just a few days, allowing us to safely continue the chemotherapy protocol.

What Modifications Can Be Made If My Pet Does Experience Chemotherapy Side Effects?

If your dog or cat does experience side effects after chemotherapy, we will assess the severity and determine the best course of action. For example, some pets start prophylactic anti-nausea or anti-diarrhea medications on the day chemotherapy is administered to eliminate stomach upset. For pets experiencing more significant side effects, we may recommend a chemotherapy dose reduction or an alternative chemotherapy protocol. Overall, our goal is to always promote your pet's excellent quality of life during their chemotherapy protocol, and we'll adjust as needed to make sure your pet feels well while receiving cancer treatments.