

Lymphoma.

What is Lymphoma?

Lymphoma is a cancer of the lymphocytes, or white blood cells. When the lymphocytes become cancerous within a lymph node the node swells and hardens. It can also affect other organs in the body such as the liver, spleen, bone marrow and gastrointestinal tract.

Ultimately the bone marrow (where the most blood cells are formed) is affected and the immune system is destroyed. The severe anaemia, inability to fight infection and weakness this causes will eventually be fatal.

Without treatment life-expectancy is sadly short, with many patients surviving only a month or two from the time of diagnosis.

Can it be treated?

Because lymphoma affects sites throughout the body, treatment likewise must treat the whole body. There are several different chemotherapy plans described, usually using a combination of drugs.

Different plans have different intensities of treatment and no one plan will suit every owner and every pet. We will discuss with you the different options to help you decide which approach best suits your pet.

Depending on the treatment used, survival times average between 2 - 12 months.

What is Chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy drugs are toxic to cancer cells and work by interfering with the ability of these cells to grow and multiply. A combination of drugs is used so that cancer cells are killed by several different means to try to prevent the cells from becoming resistant to the individual drugs. Your pet will not receive all the drugs each time they visit. Our main goal with treatment is to extend your pet's life whilst still maintaining a good quality of life for them.

Protocols.

There are 4 different combinations of medication we typically offer. More details about the individual drugs are on the following page. We usually use one of the following protocols:

Prednisolone

This is the simplest option, although it does offer the shortest average survival times. The tablets are given daily by yourself at home. Survival times with prednisolone alone only average around 2 months.

Prednisolone & Cyclophosphamide

This is again a simple protocol, with all tablets administered at home. Cyclophosphamide has the potential to cause more serious side effects than prednisolone and requires more careful handling (see later). Survival times are slightly better than just using prednisolone alone, but still only average 2-3 months.

Vincristine, Prednisolone & Cyclophosphamide

This is a more involved protocol for you and your pet. Typically, the vincristine injection is given once a week at the Thornbury hospital for 6 weeks, then once a month after that. The tablets are given at home. On this treatment the average life expectancy is 4-6 months.

Epirubicin, Vincristine, Prednisolone & Cyclophosphamide (Dogs)

This protocol offers the best remission rates, with average life expectancy improved to approximately 11 months. There are a greater risks of side effects with these medications (see later) and the protocol again requires weekly trips to the Thornbury hospital.

Bear in mind not all patients will respond as we would like to the chemotherapy agents. 15-30% of patients will not go into full remission, even with the more intensive protocols.

As each individual's response to medication varies, we will keep your pet's treatment regime under close review and may vary the protocol if needed.

Will chemotherapy make my pet sick?

Chemotherapy is usually very well tolerated by most cats and dogs; however, it is important to observe your pet closely and monitor for side effects. All chemotherapy drugs have the potential to produce adverse side effects. However, due to the lower doses used in pets, the side effects that can occur are usually not as severe as those that occur in humans. It is important to know what the possible side effects of each drug are so that you will know what to expect. As the caregiver, you have an important role in recognising the side effects and alerting us if the side effects persist. The main side effects are discussed below.

Prednisolone

Increased thirst. They will therefore also urinate more frequently.

Increased appetite. Dogs may also pant more.

Cyclophosphamide

Cystitis. Cyclophosphamide can cause a chemical irritation to the bladder that can cause the urine to become bloody (haemorrhagic cystitis) and the bladder to be painful. We try to reduce the risk of this by giving it with a diuretic (furosemide) that causes your pet to drink more frequently, by giving the cyclophosphamide in the morning and by allowing plenty of opportunity for urination during the day. We also advise regularly checking your pet's urine for traces of blood.

Vincristine

Gastrointestinal upsets. Vincristine can cause vomiting and diarrhoea or constipation. It may also reduce your pet's appetite.

Reduction in blood cell counts. We regularly blood test your pet while they are on vincristine to detect these changes.

Vincristine is given as an intravenous injection with great care as it can cause severe skin damage if any drug leaks around the vein.

Epirubicin

Epirubicin can cause more severe side effects than the other medications. Again, gastrointestinal upsets and reduction in blood cell counts may be seen. It can also be toxic to the heart, which although is rare is a serious potential side effect.

Extreme care is taken when giving the injection. It must be given very slowly into your pet's vein. We do this under sedation to make this as safe as possible, if any drug leaks around the vein it causes severe skin damage.

Staying safe during your pet's chemotherapy treatment

The medications used in chemotherapy have potential to cause people harm. The tablets must be handled carefully, as must your pet's excreta as the drug will be present here in small amounts too.

What to have at home

Disposable gloves
Poop bags
Bleach solution (5ml bleach to 250 ml water)

Handling Medication

Always wear gloves when administering medication.
NEVER split, break or dissolve chemotherapy tablets.
Store all medications safely and out of reach

Pet Excretion (urine, faeces or vomit)



DOGS

Wear gloves when handling faeces and use 2 bags to "double bag" before disposal.
Take a diluted bleach solution out on walks with your dog and use this on areas where your dog has urinated.
Try and avoid walking your dog in a busy park area where there are lots of other dogs and where children play.



CATS

Wear disposable gloves when cleaning the litter tray.
When cleaning the litter tray; double bag the contents of the tray and clean the litter tray with a bleach solution.
Cats should not be allowed to go outside while they are on chemotherapy.

Remember: Hand hygiene is imperative; always wash your hands after handling medication and excreta.

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