



YOUR PET, CANCER AND DRUG TREATMENT.

Can drugs be used to treat cancer in animals?

Certain types of cancer in animals can be controlled by drugs, in particular tumours of the lymph gland (*lympoma* or *lympho-sarcoma*), leukaemia and some cancers with a high tendency to spread.

Is this chemotherapy?

In that *chemotherapy* means “treatment with chemicals”; yes –but so is the use of antibiotics to treat an infection or aspirin for a headache. Unfortunately “chemotherapy” conjures up all sorts of awful side effects that occurred in human cancer patients under drug treatment. Now in the human field many of these side effects do not occur or are controlled. Through out this leaflet the phrase “drug treatment” is used in preference.

Are there any side effects?

Serious side effects are infrequent in animals following anti-cancer drug treatment. Nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, hair loss and the other unpleasant side effects that are common in people can occur in animals but are avoided if at all possible.

How does anti-cancer drug treatment work?

All dividing (growing) cells are susceptible to certain drugs, in some instances the cells are killed in others the cells simply stop growing. As yet no drug has been found that only attacks cancer cells so some damage is caused to normal cells. However by spacing the dosing of drugs and using mixtures, the effect on the cancer cells can be maximised whilst allowing the normal cells to recover. Obviously if the dose is too high or the drugs given to often then serious damage to normal cells can occur and this could be lifethreatening.

What are the specific side effects?

Several drugs are used in veterinary cancer treatment and they all have **potential** side effects. In 80 to 90 per cent of animals the side effects are minimal or not at all. Your veterinarian will explain them to you.

Following the drug treatment what happens to the tumour?

This depends on the type of cancer but the aim of the drug is to reduce the size of the tumour to as small as possible and to stop or, more commonly, slow further growth. For the majority of tumours and animals treated with drugs this treatment has to be continued for life or until the tumour no longer responds.

Are the drugs safe on humans?

All drugs should be handled with care and stored in a safe place **out of the reach of children**. This is particularly important with anti-cancer drugs as they have serious implications. However if used properly then they are safe. Cyclophosphamide (shiny white tablets) should not be broken and half-chewed tablets should be picked up with toilet paper and flushed down the toilet – then wash your hands. Normal hygiene practices with regard to animal excreta should be followed.

Will the tumour start growing again?

The likelihood of a response to drug treatment depends on the tumour type but unfortunately, even those tumours with a high average remission rate, re-growths do occur.

These reoccurrences are because with veterinary cancer treatment it is very rare to kill all of the malignant cells using drugs alone. Some of the cells will be resistant to the drugs and therefore will survive and grow relentlessly. In some cases this can be as short as a few weeks and in others as long as 18 months or more.

Is it worth doing?

For many pets if it were not for the cancer they would be healthy individuals. Drug treatment can and does provide a means of cancer control and may allow an excellent quality of life for 6, 12 or more months for many animal patients. The quality of life is, and must always be, the most important consideration when treatment is contemplated.

