

# Your cancer treatment and pets

For many people, their pet is part of the family – and following a cancer diagnosis, a pet can be a great source of comfort and companionship.

You may wonder how safe it is to be around animals when you are being treated for cancer. Talk to your healthcare team about your treatment plan and your pets – they may advise you to take extra care.



## Your pet

*“Can I still walk my dog during cancer treatment?”, “Can my pet sleep on my bed while I’m being treated?”, “What precautions can I take with my pets to avoid infections?”*

These are all common questions that you and your family may have about your pets. Having a pet can bring comfort, emotional and social support and is associated with many positive effects including decreased stress and anxiety. Looking after your pet can also give a sense of purpose and routine to your day, and there is no doubt that they are amazing company.

If you have a weak immune system or you are having cancer treatment, you may find some of these suggestions useful.

## Contact with your pet

*Can I still walk my dog during treatment?*

Yes. Sunlight, fresh air and exercise are essential for our wellbeing. If you feel able to walk, then do so. A dog harness may give greater control over an energetic dog than a collar and lead. Keep dogs active and try not to alter their routine too much. Tired dogs are happy dogs – and less

likely to misbehave or act out. Ask a friend or neighbour to help walk your dog if needed. Wear gloves to dispose of dog poo.

*Can I be affectionate with my pet?*

Continue to enjoy time with your pet but try to avoid boisterous behaviour that could result in scratching or biting/mouthing behaviour and don't encourage them to lick you. Wash your hands thoroughly after contact with your pet.

*Can my pet sleep on my bed during treatment?*

Cats and dogs may leave bacteria, dirt and hair on your bedding if they are allowed to sleep on your bed. Getting your pet to sleep in their own bed may also let you have a more restful, undisturbed sleep. If your pet is used to sleeping on your bed, gradually try to get them used to sleeping in their own bed on your bedroom floor as a compromise.

*Can I pick up an infection from my pet?*

Dogs and cats are considered low risk for zoonotic disease transmission (diseases passed from animals to humans), especially if personal protective equipment (PPE) is used. Common-sense hygiene practices, such as thorough hand washing, can effectively prevent most infections.

# Care for your pet and reduce your risk of infection

- Avoid emptying your cat's litter tray or picking up dog poo. If this cannot be avoided, make sure you wear disposable gloves, especially if your pet has diarrhoea.
- **Do not** kiss your dog or cat on the mouth or face and do not allow them to lick your face.
- Move your pet's litter tray away from areas of food preparation and cooking.
- If you feed your dog a raw food diet, wear gloves when preparing their meals or have a family member do this for you.
- Make an appointment with your vet to make sure your dog or cat is up to date with their vaccinations, worming and tick and flea treatments before you start your cancer treatment.
- Have a dog walker or family member on standby to walk your dog, for times you may not feel up to it.
- Consider a trusted day-care or overnight facility for your dog, so that they have an outlet for play and you can get extra rest if you need it.
- Have your dog or cat groomed and nails cut before you have treatment. Keeping nails short helps avoid accidental scratches and grooming helps keep them extra clean – and saves you washing them yourself!
- If your pet is on regular medication, ask your vet for an extended prescription in case it becomes difficult for you to pick up medications.



## Getting a new pet

While animals are great company and contribute hugely to our sense of wellbeing, think carefully before bringing a new animal into your home at this time. Young puppies and kittens need a lot of care, toilet training and socialisation in the initial months. Young animals are also more likely to have diarrhoea and frequent poos (that need disposed of), and they need worming treatments regularly. While having a pet at home for company when you are resting may seem like a wonderful idea, a new pet may be more demanding than you expect.

## Checklist – things to remember:

- Their vaccinations
- Their worm and flea treatment
- A general health check with vet
- A dog walker or family member who will walk the dog
- PPE such as gloves and plastic aprons for disposing of pet waste or emptying litter trays
- Grooming and nail clip

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