

# Caring for Your Pets When You Have Cancer

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The CancerCare Connect® Booklet Series offers up-to-date, easy-to-read information on the latest treatments, managing side effects and coping with cancer.

Founded in 1944, CancerCare® is the leading national organization providing free, professional support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

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# Caring for Your Pets When You Have Cancer

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# An Innate Connection

A growing body of research is confirming what pet owners have long known: there is an innate bond between humans and animals that has a positive effect on the health and overall well-being of pet owners and pets alike.

Pets can be a great source of emotional comfort for people undergoing treatment for cancer. In addition to the simple joy their presence brings, studies have shown that petting dogs and cats releases “feel good” hormones in humans, such as serotonin, prolactin and oxytocin.

This e-booklet provides tips and guidance on caring for your pet when you have cancer—but you shouldn’t be alone in this endeavor. Build a personal support network of family and friends to help you. You likely have many people in your life who would be happy to take on any number of tasks, including walking your dog, changing your cat’s litter, taking your pet to veterinary appointments or simply giving your pet some special attention.

There are also professional resources available. A few that offer services nationwide are listed in the Resource section.

In this e-booklet, we focus on dogs and cats, but there is information on other types of animals in the “Keeping Yourself Healthy” section. Although we often refer to “your pet” rather than “your pets,” we recognize that many households have multiple pets, perhaps even of different species.



# Keeping Your Pets Healthy

Going through treatment for cancer is a very difficult and challenging time in your life. The company of pets can help ease the burden and be a source of support. Caring for a pet can also help you stay disciplined and encourage you to go outside for exercise and fresh air. Take steps to ensure your pet stays healthy and happy so it can be a calming companion throughout your cancer experience.

- **Start from a healthy place.** Have a veterinarian examine your pet to make sure it's healthy and up-to-date on its heartworm and intestinal parasite preventatives and that it is protected against fleas and ticks. Ask a member of your vet's staff to provide you with a schedule for future preventatives and to contact you when any update is needed. You can also set a reminder in your smart phone or in a physical calendar.



- **Keep your dog active.** As the saying goes, tired dogs are happy dogs. When dogs don't get enough activity, they may start to act out or misbehave. Make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise, including extra walks if possible. Have a friend, neighbor or dog walker help you as needed.
- **Stick to a routine.** Dogs are creatures of habit, so try not to alter their routine too much. They are happiest—and most able to deal with new things—when their routine is stable. (On a related note, this is not the time to bring a new pet into the household.)
- **Lock up your medications.** Drugs designed to help humans can harm or even kill animals. Make sure your medications are completely inaccessible to your pets. If you are using any type of medicinal cream, don't let your dog or cat brush up against or lick the area where it is applied. If your pet does ingest some of your medication, call the veterinarian immediately (and call your own doctor to get the medicine replaced).
- **Close your toilet lids.** Drugs dangerous to dogs and cats may be excreted in your urine and traces may remain in the toilet bowl even after you flush. Be sure to keep the lid tightly closed and consider investing in a toilet lock.
- **Keep doors to the outside closed.** Remind your visitors to make sure they close the door behind them when they arrive and when they leave. If you have a gated yard, keep the gate closed and locked as a precaution against your pet wandering outside the yard (this also prevents uninvited dogs from entering your yard).
- **Make sure your dog is bathed regularly.** This is a perfect task to delegate to a friend or family member. Regular baths help keep your pet healthy and provide it with personal attention and affection.

Additionally, here's guidance for when you come home from the hospital or any health care facility:

- **Leave your shoes at the door.** Your shoes may be carrying staph, methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) or other infections which can be transmitted to your pets. Use a disinfectant spray when you arrive home (there are some made specifically for shoes). Leave your shoes at the door or—better yet—outside.
- **Change your clothes.** Wash the clothes you wore at the health care facility before wearing them again, as they may also carry transmittable infections.
- **Keep away from your animals after a PET scan.** The radioactive dye used in PET scans can be harmful to your cat or dog (just as it is to children). Stay away from your pets for six hours after receiving a PET scan. To be on the safe side, it's best to avoid your pet for several hours after a CT scan as well.



# Keeping Yourself Healthy

It's important to tell your pet's veterinarian that you have cancer. Ask him or her for specific advice or guidance relative to your health, based on your type of pet and any medical conditions it may have.

The following is guidance for keeping yourself healthy while enjoying the company of your pet:

- **Be careful to avoid bites and scratches.** Keep your pet's nails trimmed and avoid playing with it in a way that might result in a bite or scratch. Don't touch any pet when it is asleep, as this may be startling and cause it to strike out. Even a minor "playful" injury can become infected. This can be a serious problem, especially if you are being treated with chemotherapy, immunotherapy or radiation therapy.
- **Take extra care if you are bitten or scratched.** Wash the site of the bite or scratch with soap and water for at least three minutes, dry, and then cover the site. Closely monitor the area for swelling, redness, tenderness or drainage, all of which can be signs of an infection. Contact your health care team immediately if any of these signs appear, or if you develop a fever.
- **Keep your pet away from your face.** As dogs and cats can transmit diseases, you don't want them licking your mouth or nose. You also don't want them licking an open wound or cut you may have on any part of your body. If this happens, wash your mouth, nose, open wound or cut with soap and water for at least three minutes.

- **Have someone else clean your cat's litter box.** If you must clean it yourself, wear gloves and wash your hands with soap and water for at least three minutes. (Hand sanitizers are convenient, but they won't kill all of the germs.) Keep the litter box far away from food preparation areas.
- **Monitor your pet's play pals.** Don't let your pet play with any animal that isn't under the care of a veterinarian, as such animals are more likely to pass on a fungal infection (or other disease), which your pet could transmit to you.
- **Ask someone to take your pet to its vet appointments.** This will help conserve your energy and keep you away from animals who may be sick. This is especially important if your pet is getting a "live" vaccine, such as canine distemper, parvovirus or adenovirus-2 vaccines. Ask the vet or a member of his or her staff if you are not sure whether the vaccine your pet is scheduled to receive is "live."

One final point of guidance: be aware of salmonella. Salmonella infection (salmonellosis) is a bacterial disease affecting the intestinal tract and can cause serious illness. These bacteria typically live in the intestines of animals or humans and are shed through feces.

While salmonellosis can be passed to people from any animal, it is most common with chickens and ducks, reptiles (lizards, snakes, turtles, tortoises) and rodents (rats, mice, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs). Stay away from these animals as much possible and ask someone else to clean their enclosure or tank. If it is necessary for you to touch or handle them, wear gloves and wash your hands with soap and water afterwards for three minutes.



# Asking for Help

Caring for a pet while being treated for cancer can be of benefit to both your physical and emotional health, but it can also be a source of stress. If you find yourself temporarily unable to cope, don't be afraid to ask for help. Consider using MyCancerCircle.net™ (<https://mycancercircle.net/>) to organize help from friends and family. MyCancerCircle is a free, private and customizable online tool that enables people facing cancer to organize and coordinate a circle of family members and friends to provide practical and emotional support. MyCancerCircle.net provides people facing cancer a simple, effective answer to a question they are asked constantly, "What can we do to help?" MyCancerCircle.net also allows you to look for professional or volunteer resources in your community, such as pet nannies and dog walkers.

In the event you need full-time help for a period of time, there are organizations that help you place your pet in a temporary, pre-qualified foster home. Ask your veterinarian which local organizations he or she recommends. Your pet can return home from its foster family as soon as you feel up to providing its care. Researching local options when you are feeling well can help make sure you don't feel rushed into making a last-minute decision.



# Communicating with Your Health Care Team

Make sure to tell all doctors involved in your care that you have a pet. Tell them your type of pet, its age and any health conditions it may have. Also share your level of involvement in your pet's care and if you have any ongoing help for specific care tasks. Ask if there are specific precautions you should take based on the type of cancer you have and how long you should keep those precautions in place.

Here is some general guidance for improving communication with your health care team (whether or not you have pets):

**You are a consumer of health care.** The best way to make decisions about your care is to educate yourself about your diagnosis and get to know the members of your health care team, including doctors, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, dietitians, social workers and patient navigators.

**Start a health care journal.** Having a health care journal or notebook will allow you to keep all of your health information in one place. You may want to write down the names and contact information of the members of your health care team, as well as any questions for your doctor. Keep a diary of your daily experiences with cancer and treatment. You can separate your journal or notebook into different sections to help keep it organized.

**Prepare a list of questions.** Before your next medical appointment, write down your questions and concerns. Because your doctor may have limited time, ask your most important questions first and be as specific as possible.

**Bring someone with you to your appointments.** Even if you have a journal and a prepared list of questions or concerns, it's always helpful to have support when you go to your appointments. The person who accompanies you can serve as a second set of ears. He or she may also think of questions to ask your doctor or remember details about your symptoms or treatment that you may have forgotten.



**Write down your doctor's answers.** Taking notes will help you remember your doctor's responses, advice and instructions. You can also ask the person who accompanies you to take notes for you. If you have a mobile device, ask if you can use it to take notes. Keeping notes will help you review the information later.

**Record your visit if your doctor allows it.** Recording the conversation with your doctor gives you a chance to hear specific information again or share it with family members or friends.

**Incorporate other health care professionals into your team.** Your medical oncologist is an essential member of your health care team, but there are other health care professionals who can help you manage your diagnosis and treatment:

- Your primary care physician should be kept updated about your cancer treatments and test results.
- Your local pharmacist is a great source of knowledge about the medications you are taking. Have all of your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy to avoid the possibility of harmful drug interactions.
- Make sure your oncologist knows of any other medical conditions you have or any side effects you are experiencing so that they can consult with your primary care physician or specialists as needed.

Remember, there is no such thing as over-communication.

# CancerCare's Free Support Services and Programs

**Receiving a diagnosis of cancer can be very difficult, and adjusting to the necessary changes in your life can be challenging.**

CancerCare® can help. We are a national nonprofit organization providing free, professional services to anyone affected by cancer. Our licensed oncology social workers can provide support and education, help in navigating the complicated health care system and offer information on support groups and other resources.

To learn more about how CancerCare helps, call us at 800-813-HOPE (4673) or visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org).



## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q: My cat had an intestinal parasitic infection in the past. I am now undergoing cancer treatment. What precautions should I take if my cat gets that sort of infection again?**

A: You should avoid cleaning the litter box whether or not your cat has any kind of illness. It's especially important to stay away from your cat if it has a parasitic infection (e.g., toxoplasma, roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms) as it could be passed on to you through their feces. Whoever changes the litter box should do so every day. They should also wash the cat's rear end with water daily. Stay away from your cat's rear end; if you do accidentally touch that part of their body (or anywhere near it), wash with soap and water for three minutes.

**Q: My dog is very high energy. Do you have any special tips for me?**

A: Be proactive in enlisting the help of family, friends, neighbors or dog walkers to provide your dog with extra walks. Some pet walking services have smart phone or tablet apps that allow you to find, hire and schedule dog walkers on demand; ask your veterinarian if he or she has a website, service or app to recommend.

Many owners use lavender oil on their dogs for its calming effect. You can put a few drops on your dog's collar or create a mixture in a spray bottle that you then spray onto a towel or washcloth for your dog to sniff. Before using lavender oil (or any essential oil) on your dog, make sure your veterinarian approves. Never use essential oils on cats, as it can be harmful to them.

Another tip is to line a hollow rubber chew toy (Kong is one brand name) with a treat such as butter, peanut butter, cream cheese or liverwurst and freeze it. It will take your dog longer to eat the frozen treat, which keeps them occupied and gives them the opportunity for prolonged chewing and licking (which is enjoyable to many dogs). Talk to your vet, as he or she may have some additional recommendations along these lines.

**Q: Is it safe for my pet to sleep in my bed when I'm in treatment for cancer?**

A: Talk to a member of your health care team before deciding on your pet's sleeping arrangements. While it can be a comfort to have your pet sleep in your bed, there are circumstances that require extra caution. Keep your dog or cat out of your bed if you have had recent surgery. While you are sleeping, your pet might put pressure against the area that is healing, which could cause pain or lead to an infection. Pets may also think post-surgery tubing (e.g., a drain or catheter) is a toy. They could play with or chew on the tubing, which is potentially harmful to them as well as to you. For the same reason, keep your pet out of your bed if you are receiving nighttime drugs via an intravenous line.

**Q: Will my dog be allowed to visit me in the hospital?**

A: While many hospitals have protocols that allow certified therapy dogs to visit people in the hospital with a trained handler, it is not a practice that typically extends to a person's own dog. Such visits can happen under extenuating circumstances, so talk to a member of the hospital staff if you and your doctor want to investigate that possibility (keeping in mind that such a visit may be stressful for your dog and therefore inadvisable).

Many of the same protocols that apply to therapy dogs would apply to your dog (e.g., dogs must be at least one year old, vaccinated against rabies, bathed and combed prior to entering the hospital and bathed after leaving). People being visited by their own dog or a therapy dog should wash their hands before and after the visit and should not eat or drink during the visit. Note: Kittens and cats should not visit you in the hospital. They are more likely to bite or scratch than is a trained dog, which can cause the spread of bacteria.

**Q: I'm undergoing treatment for cancer. Is equine therapy something I should pursue?**

A: Guided by a therapist, equine therapy brings people and horses together to build physical strength and mobility in people being treated for cancer or other medical conditions. It can also have positive effects on emotional health and quality of life. The time spent with horses can include grooming activities as well as riding. Ask your doctor if equine therapy is right for you at your stage of treatment and if he or she has recommendations for a licensed therapist for you to contact.



## Resources

### **CancerCare®**

800-813-HOPE (800-813-4673)

[www.cancercares.org](http://www.cancercares.org)

### **American Cancer Society**

800-227-2345

[www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/infections/can-i-keep-my-pet-during-chemotherapy.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/infections/can-i-keep-my-pet-during-chemotherapy.html)

### **Resources for Pet Owners in General**

#### **American Veterinary Medical Association**

[www.avma.org/public/PetCare/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.avma.org/public/PetCare/Pages/default.aspx)

#### **American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**

[www.asPCA.org/pet-care/dog-care/general-dog-care](http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/dog-care/general-dog-care)

#### **Animal Humane Society**

[www.animalhumanesociety.org/adoption/caring-your-new-pet](http://www.animalhumanesociety.org/adoption/caring-your-new-pet)

#### **The Humane Society**

[www.humanesociety.org/resources/are-you-having-trouble-affording-your-pet](http://www.humanesociety.org/resources/are-you-having-trouble-affording-your-pet)

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