

Feeding a pet during chemotherapy

Animal behaviourist, Allison L Martin of the School of Psychology, Georgia Institute of Technology, points out that eating is not just a biological process, or sometimes a medical issue, but is also a behavioural issue. For instance, we tend to eat more when at a celebration and less if we happen to find ourselves in some awkward personal situation or are personally distressed. Our pets' eating habits are affected in similar ways.

When it comes to chemotherapy and the giving of the medication, there are multiple articles on the Internet giving tips on how to get pills or capsules down a pet's throat. Sprays are not usually a problem and likely to be an ancillary medication anyway. It is the chemo medication that is often the problem.

For a dog experiencing difficulty with swallowing daily chemo in the long term, all or most of the tips on the Internet are likely to be unhelpful for many. Using your fingers to push the capsule down is usually the most successful, but at times several tries might be necessary.

In fact, if you have daily to get your dog to swallow medication that it finds repulsive, you had better be prepared for repetitive efforts and for feeling a high level of stress yourself, as well as a growing sense of inadequacy, feelings of near despair when you contemplate a year of this, and even a few tears.

The medication has to go down: the small chemo capsule is a nightmare of scary proportions, the spray is easy peasy unless it tastes revolting, and a half-tablet for gastric protection is much more difficult than one would expect. Ingenious ways of hiding this merely convince one of permanent failure, because your dog's eyesight, to say nothing of its intuition, can pinpoint the whereabouts of a hidden half-tablet with unerring precision. This will astonish no one who knows that certain breeds are now being trained to 'sniff out' diseases like cancer and diabetes.

Since we have built up trust over fourteen years, I imagined that I could, with love and guile, get any small piece of disguised medication down Bonnie's throat if skilfully hidden in a favourite food.

But there's the rub. Bonnie's favourite food changes every day. First of all, she has a small discerning appetite. Secondly, she scorns her breakfast and will perhaps nibble at it occasionally during the day, even if comprises a current favourite. Chemo, on the other hand, has to be given with breakfast... with food.

A vanishing act

As soon as I think 'chemo medication', Bonnie is not to be found. Usually she never leaves my side, but some intimation that chemo medication is imminent results in her finding a different hiding place in the garden every day. When she eventually comes back inside rather dejectedly, it means "Okay, I give up. Bring on that horrible stuff."

But if anybody thought that this was now going to be straightforward, perish the thought. Having long since abandoned the ten tips relating to how to give dogs medication, I eventually bought a capsule plunger from the vet. One draws a small amount of water into the plunger and fits the capsule snugly into the open end. One then gently presses down the plunger and shoots off the capsule to the back of the throat where the water (supposedly) will cause the animal to swallow. Except that it doesn't. Instead, it somehow ends up floating the capsule somewhere in the inner cheek, presumably

because Bonnie knows how to move her tongue at just the vital moment to effect expulsion. So we try again. And perhaps again. Eventually, with tears beginning to form (in one's own eyes, not one's pet's), one takes hold of the now soggy capsule in one's fingers and pushes it as gently as possible down the back of the throat, followed by a spray of water to help swallowing and holding the jaw gently closed.

When the capsule finally goes down, we are both jubilant. It is time for the medicinal spray, and that must taste quite nice because it goes down easily. Now there is only the half-tablet, and that doesn't have a chance, since every crumb of food will now be carefully examined and rejected, even if pill-free.

Next round

Some time later in the day, I try adroitly to hide pieces of the half-tablet in a treat. Having rejected breakfast, Bonnie is not likely to eat a meal until much later in the day, so there is no chance of following chemo with food as instructed. It might be ten p.m. before she decides to eat, and she might have to be handfed, which is generally hugely disapproved of, as being likely to end in having a permanently hand-fed dog. Well, as long as I get those chemo meds down Bonnie's throat, I don't care a darn!

I discover Allison's guide for dogs on chemo

Finding Allison L Martin's comments on "Feeding a Pet during Chemotherapy: an Owner's Guide" was therefore like spring rain on a parched landscape. It was quite different from the repetitive lists of tips, all of which most dogs know how to evade without the least effort. We forget their superior senses, and we fail to acknowledge the degree of their intelligence.

Allison says that, while learning most things involves repetitive experiences or 'trials', food aversion training can happen very quickly via 'one-trial' learning. This helps species in the wild to survive. Having had her first chemo capsule, smelling it before it even goes down, your dog will immediately recognise it again, especially if you hide it in the same kind of food.

So you have to change what you offer her. Even using different bowls might dilute suspicion (although I have a very suspicious dog... I adopted her as an SPCA stray, or rather she chose me by way of backward flips, impressive leaps, and irresistible eager little canine pleadings. I adored this beautiful little dog on sight, and she is almost frighteningly bright and even more loving.

Allison actually recommends hand-feeding when desperation sets in. She says that experience shows that when chemo treatment is finally over, pets can be weaned off hand-feeding.

Here is a good tip from Allison: on a good day when your pet is eating well, you are naturally grateful to get all the *muthi* down, but on a bad day you need to concentrate on the chemo itself (which *must* go down) and you can perhaps just for that day let up on one of the accompanying medications that are less vital. Your vet will advise.

Bonnie's half-tablet can be crushed, so can be introduced into any small treat. This sounds easy. It isn't. It is likely that the treat will be placed on the ground, sniffed, pushed around a bit, and discarded. I retrieve it and keep trying until I have at last got most of it down. Even such partial success is mildly elating. unrolled, thereby losing a good deal of its surreptitious cargo. One can deal with the reproach being directed at one from the watching eyes, because collecting the bits of tablets and scraping up the powder

for the final onslaught is the act that singles completion. It is essential to lull oneself into the feeling that one has done one's job for today... or almost.

If I have squashed the half-tablet to powder, a good deal of it can be lost in the try-and-try-again process. But then there are those red-letter days when, after a few little healthy treats that are innocent of bits of tablet, Bonnie simply swallows down the treat containing the tablet, and we celebrate. She dances round and jumps onto one of her two favourite window-ledges, looking to see if there any vervets in the garden to bark at in such a moment of victory.

Commercial diets are out. She never liked these. I bought an expensive packet once from the vet as a last resort. Even though the chunks are very tiny, they were so rock-hard that they emerged whole in her faeces, so I eliminated them from her diet. When I tried to smash some of the fresh pebbles with a hammer, they were too hard to break without real determination. Soaking them in a little water or gravy made no difference to their texture. Her digestive system needs tender care, not little pebbles that are as hard as marbles. I discovered that vets usually have samples of special biscuits, so recommend that owners ask to see some before they buy.

What about hydration?

There just will be days when your pet will not eat at all. It's worrying, but you have to live with it. Missing food for a day will not be harmful. Many healthy animals do this. If the abstinence continues, seek your vet's attention immediately.

If an inadequate amount of water is being drunk, this will rapidly create an emergency situation, because dehydration will make your pet feel a good deal worse. Your vet will show you how to check for dehydration.

Allison is of the opinion that pets are not manipulative. If, owing to your pet's lack of appetite, you feed him steak, for instance, he will not hold out for steak forever after and refuse to eat anything less tasty again. However, you can accidentally reinforce food refusal behaviour. If you immediately replace rejected food with something more tasty, your pet is smart enough to know what to do. What I have learnt to do is offer small helpings of two or three different foods at once and then add more to whichever portion my dog chooses. Alison points out that this is not food refusal but simply exercising a choice!

The role of praise

Give ample praise when your pet takes his medication or eats well. Don't make a fuss if he refuses food. Just wait an hour and offer it again.

If your pet is not eating well to the point of your being worried, offer him food at several different times of day. Allison found that her dog on chemo liked to eat at midnight. I have found this with Bonnie. She usually chooses to eat her main meal very late at night. Fortunately, I am a night owl.

Much as some dog experts might disagree, Allison advises having several types of food on hand, and I can confirm that this works for Bonnie. I spend a lot of time preparing her food and trying to keep her in the best health possible. Because she is a small dog with a small appetite, she has a mainly meat diet – boiled chicken, raw or slightly cooked beef, or mince, with cooked chicken livers just a couple of times a week, plus a small amount of carbs. She likes bit of leftover roast potato and is fond of a tablespoonful of corn when I cook corn on the cob. She also (sometimes) likes little bits of toast or Provita. If I have made oven-baked French fries, and Bonnie is not eating her food, I will happily offer her

a few. A large dog would need more carbs, probably by way of adding good pellets to the meat and vegetables.

The rules fly out the window when one has a beloved animal on chemotherapy. The main objective is to get the chemo and other medications down and to try to get your pet to eat an adequate amount of good food – probably including foodstuffs that you would never normally offer. Also check that faeces are not too hard or else dark and gluey, which could suggest haemorrhaging. And ensure that enough water is being drunk.

Bonnie did not normally drink a great deal of water, but now she regularly goes to one of the water bowls every hour or so and takes seven or eight sips. Despite drinking more, she continues to sleep through the night and seldom needs to go out during the night to relieve herself.

“Having a pet on chemotherapy is an emotional roller coaster,” says Allison Martin. “Be kind to yourself. I hope my experiences and recommendations will you on your ride.”

They have helped Bonnie and me, and that is why I am passing our experiences on to you here.

If you have a pet on chemotherapy and have anything you would like to share with us, please write to me at shirleybell@mweb.co.za.