



Children's
Cancer and
Leukaemia
Group

the EXPERTS
in CHILDHOOD
CANCER

Handling animals and pets

Information for parents and carers of children and young people undergoing treatment for cancer





This booklet was written by the CCLG Information Advisory Group comprising multi-professional experts in the field of children's cancer. Originally produced by CCLG Patient Advocacy Committee in conjunction with CCLG Publications Committee, based on original research by Sue Hemsworth, Research Nurse, Royal Liverpool Children's NHS Trust. With thanks to the British Veterinary Association for its review input.

We are grateful to all those who helped to make this booklet. The quotes in this publication are from parents, patients and carers. They are personal views and do not necessarily represent the view of CCLG.

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Publication of this booklet was funded by CCLG.

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This edition: September 2021

Next review date: September 2024



Owning a pet is very rewarding and can help people to lead happier and healthier lives. Pets can offer companionship and comfort, and looking after them can give motivation and routine to each day.

Dogs are particularly good for increasing physical exercise as families can go for walks outside in the fresh air which can benefit everyone. Just by stroking, sitting next to or playing with a pet or animal can relax and calm the mind helping both children and adults when feeling sad, stressed or lonely. **Most children having treatment for cancer can and should keep their pets.**

However, it is important for families to be aware of the possible risks of owning and caring for a pet as some infections can be passed from animals to humans. This booklet provides a few simple safe guidelines on reducing the risk of your child catching an infection from an animal. It is important to follow these guidelines at all times.

Who is at risk?

Although it is rare for children on treatment to become infected by animals, the risk is slightly higher if they:

- Are on chemotherapy
- Are having radiotherapy
- Have received a bone marrow or stem cell transplant

Can we get a new pet?

It is recommended you do not get any new pets until treatment has finished. However, if you do decide to get a new pet, an adult animal (over 12 months old) is safer because younger pets may be more susceptible to infections and may not be fully vaccinated or house trained. **Please discuss with your child's doctor before getting a new pet.**



What if we already have a pet?

Pets are much-loved members of your family and you can still keep your existing pet as normal unless it appears on the list in the section below. If it does, don't panic but think about rehoming your pet(s) sensibly or ask a friend or family member if they could look after your pet in the short term during treatment.

You and your child may have long stays in hospital as part of their treatment so it is recommended to plan in advance so your pet can be taken care of by someone else when this happens.

Animals to avoid

The following animals should be avoided as they are considered high-risk animals for passing on infections to children on treatment:

- Stray animals (unless checked and given a clean bill of health by a vet)
- Any animal with diarrhoea before it has been treated by a vet
- Farm animals (including animals at farm visitor centres)
- Reptiles such as tortoises, turtles, lizards, snakes, geckos, chameleons and water dragons
- Amphibians such as frogs and toads
- Wild animals (contact should also be avoided with animals at zoos and safari parks)
- All birds, including pigeons, chicks and ducklings

Important

If children on treatment do touch animals, or their food, cage or hutch, it is important they wash their hands thoroughly with soap and running water



General hygiene

It is important that hygiene is maintained at all times by remembering three main things:

- ① It's ok to stroke your pet or animal but hands must be thoroughly washed after coming into contact with any animal, cage or hutch
- ② Children on treatment must always avoid contact with animal faeces (poo) and litter trays
- ③ Children on treatment should try and stop their pet licking their faces. If this does happen, wash well afterwards.

Handwashing

Wash your hands after any contact with pets. Remember any indirect contact with pets, such as contact with soil, sandpits and flowerbeds must also be considered.

If handwashing facilities are not immediately available, cleaning hands with alcohol hand sanitiser gel is recommended. This should be followed up with thorough handwashing at your earliest opportunity.

Feeding your pet

Use ready-prepared pet food from a tin or packet. If you feed your pet with live, raw or partly-cooked meats, you should ensure your child does not handle the meat while on treatment. (Raw meat is a source of many illnesses, even microwaving the meat may not kill all of the germs.)

Make sure your pet always has fresh water that is changed at least once a day. Bacteria can grow in water that is not changed frequently.

Pet bedding and litter trays

- Keep your pet's bedding area clean
- Keep litter trays away from your kitchen and eating areas
- Avoid placing litter trays in warm places such as near a radiator or fire as the heat will make germs grow more quickly
- Change litter trays daily. Some germs (including toxoplasmosis) take 24 hours to become infectious.
- Children on treatment must never handle the dirty litter
- Children should avoid being in the same room when bedding or litter trays are being changed

Living with your pet

- Avoid contact with your pet's urine, poo, saliva and vomit
- Children should be kept away from pets that have diarrhoea or are unwell
- Keep pets off kitchen surfaces. Use antibacterial spray/wipes to wipe down any surface on which food may be placed.
- Keep your pet away from the poo of other animals
- Do not let your pet lick you or your child, especially faces, open wounds or cuts
- Do not let your child kiss their pets
- Try not to let your pet rummage through bins
- Pets should be kept clean and brushed in order to keep their skin and coat healthy
- Keep your pets healthy by ensuring they are up to date with vaccinations, parasite control and check ups at the vet. (A healthy animal is less likely to pick up diseases and pass them onto humans.)
- Cover any sandpits when not in use to prevent cats using them as litter trays

- Animals, such as hamsters, guinea pigs and rabbits, that like to nibble, must be kept away from your child's central line when being cuddled
- Try and stop your cat eating or catching mice, rats or birds as it could catch a parasite disease called toxoplasmosis from them. Putting a bell on a cat may help stop cats from catching animals. It can be difficult to do this but, where possible, pets should be prevented from catching animals.
- Your pet is part of the family and may sense when something isn't right or if they are being treated differently. Try and act normally around them and carry on showing them affection and attention as normal.

Specific issues

Cats

Feline leukaemia. Humans cannot be infected with feline leukaemia but cats that do have this virus are more at risk of catching other infectious diseases.

Toxoplasmosis can be passed on to humans by contact with infected cat poo from litter trays, soil, sandpits or flower beds. Toxoplasmosis is a common disease that occurs worldwide in most birds and warm-blooded mammals, including humans. Symptoms of toxoplasmosis include head and body aches, fever, tiredness, feeling sick, sore throat, coughing up blood, and trouble breathing. In some cases, toxoplasmosis can cause serious eye problems in humans.



Fish

Fish can be a source of skin infections. Infections can be avoided by not allowing children to put their hands in fish tanks. Any fish with unusual lumps should be removed from the tank. If children do put their hands in the tank, they should wash their hands properly afterwards.

Ferrets

Flu can be passed from humans to ferrets and from ferrets to humans.

Dogs

Bordetella vaccine for dogs is a live vaccine that can affect immunocompromised people if they are exposed to it. Children on cancer treatment should avoid contact with dogs that have been given the Bordetella vaccine until six weeks have passed from the vaccination date.

More information

Please contact your child's nurse or consultant if you have any questions about owning pets



Your pet and the vet

- If you think your pet is ill, don't let your child hold it and get advice from your vet as soon as possible
- Your pet should be taken to the vet if it develops diarrhoea
- Your pet must be wormed regularly. If they have fleas, ticks or mites they will need treating by the vet. Make sure they are on a regular parasite control programme. Your home will need treating at the same time if your pet has fleas.
- Don't allow your pet's claws to get too long as they may cause scratches. Don't try to cut them yourself unless you have been shown how to by a vet.
- Have your pet checked by a vet at least once a year
- Keep your pet's immunisations and parasite control up to date. Please ask your vet if you are unsure about worming programmes and vaccinations.
- If you think your pet has a skin infection it should be checked by a vet
- The animal charity PDSA can help with low-cost or free treatment for pets of owners who are struggling financially. For more information, visit www.pdsa.org.uk



First aid

If your child is bitten by any animal you must do the following:

- **Wash the bite** well with antibacterial handwash
- **Dry the bite** well with gauze
- **Cover the wound** with a clean piece of gauze or plaster
- **Inform your child's oncology unit** who may refer you to A&E as soon as possible

The guidelines in this booklet will help your child to stay safe from any possible risks and you can continue to enjoy the happy and rewarding times of owning a pet!



“ My 5-year-old daughter Millie adores our cat, Kitcat. However, Kitcat is a hunter and we did consider whether she should stay with friends for a few months. But we’ve decided she can stay put for now, just not on her bed, and Millie has to wash her hands after stroking her. ”
Hannah, mum of Millie who has acute myeloid leukemia (AML)

“ Edie lost her confidence quite a bit when she was first on treatment. Her hair started falling out, her appearance changed and she felt her friends treated her differently.

Lily, however, was constant. After all, a dog doesn't care if you're tired and bloated from steroids or you can't join in activities due to fatigue. They just want to be by your side and that's what Edie needed.

Lily always seems to know how to offer love and support with the right nuzzle or cuddle. She has helped all of us to cope with life through cancer.”

Cate, mum of Edie who was diagnosed with a brain tumour in 2011, on their much-loved cockerpoo Lily-Pickle



Edie taking Lily-Pickle for a walk

“ Edie and Lily-Pickle are best friends!”



“ If I'm having a bad day with treatment, Lily always makes me feel better. She doesn't mind if I'm too tired to play or just want to lie on my bed. She just cuddles next to me and licks my hand. She seems to just get how I feel and wants to be my friend no matter how sad or happy I am. She understands.”

Edie, aged 12



Edie on treatment





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Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group (CCLG) is a leading national charity and expert voice for all childhood cancers.

Each week in the UK and Ireland, more than 30 children are diagnosed with cancer. Our network of dedicated professional members work together in treatment, care and research to help shape a future where all children with cancer survive and live happy, healthy and independent lives.

We fund and support innovative world-class research and collaborate, both nationally and internationally, to drive forward improvements in childhood cancer. Our award-winning information resources help lessen the anxiety, stress and loneliness commonly felt by families, giving support throughout the cancer journey.

If you have any comments on this booklet, please contact us. CCLG publications on a variety of topics related to children's cancer are available to order or download free of charge from our website.

Our work is funded by donations. If you would like to help, text 'CCLG' to **70300** to donate **£3**. This costs £3 plus a standard rate message.



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