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Caring for Pets During Your Cancer Treatment

Some people worry that they'll have to give up their pet if they have cancer. Pets are family for many people and provide comfort and support. Most people can keep their pets while taking some steps to keep themselves and their pet safe.

- [Can I give my pet my cancer?](#)
- [Will my cancer treatment harm my pet?](#)
- [Can I get sick from my pet?](#)
- [Ways to lower your risk of infection from a pet](#)
- [Helping your pet avoid infections](#)
- [Pets you should avoid during cancer treatment](#)
- [Children with cancer and pets](#)
- [What if I can't care for my pets?](#)

Can I give my pet my cancer?

No. You cannot spread your cancer to your pet or anyone else. Cancer is not contagious.

Will my cancer treatment harm my pet?

For most people, getting cancer treatment will not pose a threat to their pets. If you've been told to take certain [precautions with your body fluids](#)¹, you'll want to make sure your pet isn't exposed to them. You can't harm your pet by touching them.

The most common type of radiation therapy, external beam radiation, does not make you or your body fluids radioactive. So, there is no risk to your pets or anyone else. But

certain types of radiation require safety precautions for a short time. Learn more about what [safety precautions](#)² you should take depending on the type of radiation you get.

Can I get sick from my pet?

If you have a weak immune system, it is possible to get sick from your pet. This is why it's important to take steps to keep you both safe. There are certain pets you might want to avoid during certain times of your cancer treatment. Don't take in new pets or strays during cancer treatment. They are more likely to carry germs that could get you sick. See below for more information on this.

Ways to lower your risk of infection from a pet

Here's what you should know about preventing or lowering your risk of getting an infection from a pet.

Scratches and bites

Avoid scratches and bites while you are getting cancer treatment. If your pet plays rough, you might want to avoid this kind of play while your immune system is weak.

- Keep your pet's nails trimmed if possible.
- Clean and cover any scratches until they heal.
- If you notice any redness, swelling, or pus from a scratch or injury from a pet, see a doctor right away.

If your pet bites and breaks the skin, see a doctor right away. All bites can cause an infection, even in people with normal immune systems. You might need antibiotics

sure the area is cleaned with a disinfectant.

- If you must do the cleanup because no one else can, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands afterward.

Licking, saliva, and vomit

Some infections can be spread through saliva (spit and drool), so try not to let your pet lick your face or any open cuts or wounds.

- Wash with soap and water if you get a pet's saliva on your skin.
- If your pet throws up (vomits), try to have someone else clean it up if possible. If you must do the cleanup because no one else can, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands afterward.

Touch (petting and holding)

You can touch your pet, but always wash your hands after. Some germs are spread by touching or petting the animal and then touching your face, mouth, eyes, or open cuts or wounds.

- Avoid very close contact, such as kissing, snuggling, or sleeping with your pet in the same bed.
- Wash your hands after petting, caring for, touching, feeding, or cleaning up after pets (even if you wore gloves).
- Wash your hands before taking medicines and handling food, dishes, or other things in the kitchen.
- Ask someone else to clean pet cages, tanks, or crates if possible.

Helping your pet avoid infections

You might want to tell your vet that you're getting treatment for cancer and might be at a higher risk of infection. Ask them if there are any specific problems you should watch for.

- Make sure your pets are up to date with any shots, vaccines, or flea and tick medicine.

- Ask your vet if any vaccines are “live.” Check with your cancer team before your pet gets live vaccines.
- Never let pets have expired or spoiled food, raw meat, or its juices.
- Don't let your pet drink from the toilet or standing water outside.
- Clean pet food and water bowls often. Keep pet beds clean. Ask for help with bathing pets if needed.
- Keep cats indoors. Outside cats can get a parasite infection called toxoplasmosis from birds or other animals. Even if it doesn't make your cat sick, you can still get a serious infection.
- Keep dogs inside except for bathroom breaks and walks. Keep your dog on a leash during walks and try to avoid other animals.
- Try to avoid having your pet boarded in a kennel, daycare, or other public areas where they are exposed to other animals.
- If your pet has a runny nose, cough, weight loss, vomiting, or diarrhea, get them checked out by a vet right away.

Pets you should avoid during cancer treatment

Certain pets have a higher risk of spreading infections to people with weak immune systems.

- Reptiles including snakes, turtles, lizards, and iguanas
- Rodents including mice, rats, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs
- Animals such as ferrets, monkeys, or other exotic pets
- Wild animals

Even if you don't handle these animals, certain germs such as salmonella can be spread by touching infected surfaces. If you keep pets like these, keep all cages, toys, water, and other pet items away from areas where you prepare food and eat. Use the precautions listed above when cleaning, feeding, or caring for these animals.

What about farm animals?

Many people have farm animals as pets or for income. If you have livestock, make sure you keep them healthy and protect yourself from common sources of germs.

- Make sure livestock are up to date on any recommended vaccines or shots.

- Protect livestock from exposure to wild animals.
- Clean livestock stalls and enclosures often. If possible, have someone else clean or pickup livestock waste (especially stool/poop). If you must do it, wear protective gear including gloves.
- Always wash your hands after touching livestock.
- Take care not to get bitten or kicked by farm animals.
- If you think an animal might be sick, get them checked out by a vet as soon as possible
- Don't keep farm animals in the house.
- Don't wear shoes that you wear to care for livestock inside your house.

Children with cancer and pets

Kids are more likely to crawl or play on the floor with their pets, not wash their hands, and touch their mouths. This can increase their risk of getting an infection from a family pet. Children often need help from adults to follow precautions while they have a weak immune system.

- Don't get a new pet while your child has a weak immune system.
- Kids shouldn't kiss pets or allow them to lick their face.
- Kids shouldn't share food or play rough with pets.
- Don't let kids put pet toys in their mouths.
- Help kids wash their hands after playing with pets (teach them to do this every time) .
- Keep your child away from stray or wild animals, petting zoos, and other people's pets.

Tell your child's cancer care team what pets you have and ask them if there are any special precautions you need to take. You can also ask your vet about diseases your child could catch from a pet.

What if I can't care for my pets?

Have a plan for your pets in case you get too sick to care for them or must be in the hospital. It's better to make these plans and never need them than to be worried about your pet if there's an emergency. Even if you stay in your home, you might need help with daily activities like walking your dog or cleaning the litter box.

Here are some tips to make sure your pets are safe and cared for during treatment:

- Make sure you have someone you know that agrees to care for your pets if you have an emergency or need help.
- Make sure they know where to find instructions and can get into your home.
- Have instructions for them for feeding, cleaning, toileting, medicines, and vet contacts.
- If your pet is microchipped, you can add another contact in the microchip database in case your pet gets lost and is taken to a shelter or vet.
- Know where pets can and can't go. Most health care settings do not allow pets for health and safety reasons.

There are resources available if you need pet support during your cancer treatment. See [Pets, Support, and Service Animals](#)³ for more information.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/chemotherapy/chemotherapy-safety.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/radiation/safety.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/coping/support-service-animals.html

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