



The Children &
Young People's
Cancer Association



Handling animals and pets

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

www.cclg.org.uk

**Expertise.
Progress.
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About this guide

This booklet provides a few simple guidelines to help your child stay safe around pets and reduce the risk of catching an infection from an animal.



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This booklet was reviewed by the CCLG Information Advisory Group comprising parents, carers, survivors and multi-professional experts in the field of children's and young people's cancer. With thanks to Anna Judson (President of British Veterinary Association) for her 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: February 2026

Next review date: February 2029



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“ 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 decided she could stay put, just not on the bed, and Millie had to wash her hands after stroking her. ”

Hannah, mum of Millie who had acute myeloid leukemia (AML)

Staying safe around animals

It is important for families to be aware of the possible risks of being around animals, including pets, as some infections can be passed from animals to humans.

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

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)

Hygiene

It is important to maintain good hygiene at all times by remembering three main things:



It's OK to stroke your pet or animal but wash hands thoroughly after coming into contact with any animal, cage or hutch.



Children on treatment must always avoid contact with animal faeces (poo) and litter trays.



Children on treatment should try to avoid their pet licking their face. If this does happen, wash well afterwards.

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.

Handwashing

Wash your hands after any contact with pets. This is good practice for everyone, at all times.

Soil, sandpits and flowerbeds can also contain germs from pets and animals, so wash your hands after touching those too. If handwashing facilities are not immediately available, clean hands with alcohol hand sanitiser gel. Follow up with thorough handwashing as soon as you can.

Having a good handwashing technique is important. The NHS has a step by step guide to the best way to wash your hands www.nhs.uk/live-well/best-way-to-wash-your-hands

Owning a pet

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 great for getting the whole family out in the fresh air for daily exercise.

Just being around animals can be relaxing – whether you're stroking them, playing with them or just enjoying their company. This can help to calm the mind and help both children and adults when feeling sad, distressed or lonely.

Most children having treatment for cancer can and should keep their pets.



Can we get a new pet?

It is recommended that 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. This is 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 the family, and understandably you won't want to give them up. But you may need to take extra care during treatment or think about whether it is better to re-home them for a while. The list of animals to avoid (page 4) will help you to make this decision.

During treatment, you and your child may have to stay in hospital for periods of time. It is best to have a think about who could look after your pets when you're away from home so that you have a plan in place when this happens.

What if friends or other family have pets?

Meeting friends and family can help children to feel less isolated. The principles for being safe around your own pet are the same for other people's pets. Make sure that if your child comes into contact with other people's pets, you follow the same precautions and hygiene standards. Make your friends and family aware of the potential risks to your child.

“ Edie lost her confidence 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. She helped all of us to cope with life through cancer. ”

Cate, mum of Edie who was diagnosed with a brain tumour



“ If I'm having a bad day with treatment, Lily always makes me feel better. She seems to get how I feel and wants to be my friend, no matter how sad or happy I am. She understands. ”

Edie, aged 12

Looking after your pet

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, your child should not handle the meat while on treatment. Raw meat is a source of many illnesses and even microwaving the meat may not kill all of the germs. Follow these good hygiene rules around raw pet food:

- wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling raw meat
- clean surfaces, utensils, storage containers and feeding bowls with antibacterial spray or wipes
- store and defrost pet food and treats away from where human food is stored and prepared
- use dedicated equipment for handling and storing raw pet food
- freeze raw pet food until needed and label it clearly
- store any fresh, raw pet food in a clearly labelled sealed container on the lowest shelf in the fridge, keeping it away from other food
- throw away any raw pet food that is not eaten as soon as is practical
- thoroughly clean any surfaces that the raw food may have fallen onto after your pet has eaten
- change your pet's drinking water at least once a day, as bacteria can grow in water that is not changed frequently

Pet bedding and litter trays

Follow these guidelines for bedding and litter trays:

- keep your pet's bedding area clean
- keep litter trays away from your kitchen and eating areas
- don't let children on treatment handle dirty litter
- don't change bedding or litter trays when your child is in the room

- don't put 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, as some germs (including toxoplasmosis) take 24 hours to become infectious
- wear gloves to handle litter trays and wash hands thoroughly with soap and water afterwards

Living with your pet

The tips below will help you keep your child safe around your pet:

- avoid contact with your pet's urine, poo, saliva and vomit
- keep children away from pets that have diarrhoea or are unwell
- keep pets off kitchen surfaces and use antibacterial spray or wipes to clean down any surface on which food may be placed
- keep your pet away from the poo of other animals
- don't let your pet lick you or your child, especially faces or open wounds
- do not let your child kiss their pets
- try not to let your pet rummage through bins
- keep pets clean and brushed in order to keep their skin and coat healthy
- keep your pets up to date with vaccinations, parasite control and check-ups at the vet, as a healthy animal is less likely to pick up diseases
- cover sandpits when not in use to prevent cats using them as litter trays
- animals, that like to nibble, such as hamsters, guinea pigs and rabbits, must be kept away from your child's central line when being cuddled
- try to stop your cat eating or catching animals like mice, rats or birds, as they could get a disease called toxoplasmosis from them – putting a bell on your cat may help
- your pet is part of the family and may sense when something isn't right so try to act normally with them, giving them affection and attention as usual
- wear gloves when gardening or touching soil or sand, to avoid contact with animal poo or contaminated soil
- try to avoid scratches from your pet – use a cushion under them on your child's lap and cover up bare skin to help prevent scratches happening

Your pet's health

If you think your pet is ill, don't let your child touch it and get advice from your vet as soon as possible. To keep your pet healthy:

- take your pet to the vet if it develops diarrhoea
- worm your pet regularly
- make sure your pet is on a regular parasite control programme – fleas, ticks or mites will need treating by the vet and your home will need treating at the same time if your pet has fleas
- to avoid scratches don't allow your pet's claws to get too long – don't try to cut claws 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 – 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 charity PDSA can help with low-cost or free treatment for pet owners who are struggling financially. For more information visit www.pdsa.org.uk

First aid

If your child is bitten by any animal, follow the instructions below:

- **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** — they may recommend you go to A&E as soon as possible

Please talk to your child's medical team if you have any questions about owning pets.

Specific animal issues

Cats

Humans cannot be infected with **feline leukaemia**, but cats that do have this virus are more at risk of catching other infectious diseases. Children should be kept away from cats with feline leukaemia because there is a risk of being exposed to other infections that the cat may have picked up.

Toxoplasmosis can be passed onto humans by contact with infected cat poo from litter trays, soil, sandpits or flower beds. It can also be caused by eating undercooked meat, shellfish or unwashed fresh food produce. 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.

Follow the guidelines for hygiene and feeding on pages 5, 8 and 9 to minimise the risk of toxoplasmosis infection.

Fish

Fish can be a source of **skin infections**. Don't let children 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. Children should be kept away from ferrets.

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.

We are CCLG: The Children & Young People's Cancer Association, a charity dedicated to creating a brighter future for children and young people with cancer. Powered by expertise, we unite the children and young people's cancer community, driving collective action and progress.

We fund and lead pioneering research, provide trusted information and guidance for children and young people with cancer and their families, and bring together professionals to improve treatment, care and outcomes.

Our expert information helps children and young people, and everyone supporting them, to navigate the challenges of cancer and its impact, offering reassurance and clarity when it's needed most.

Our work is funded by donations. If you would like to help, text '**CCLG**' to **70085** to donate **£3** or visit **www.cclg.org.uk/donate**. You may be charged for one text message at your network's standard or charity rate. CCLG will receive 100% of your donation.



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CCLG and The Children & Young People's Cancer Association are operating names of The Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group, registered charity in England and Wales (1182637) and Scotland (SC049948).

