

# WHAT TO KNOW IF YOU ARE UNDERGOING RADIATION THERAPY AND HAVE A PET

## THE COMMON QUESTIONS

Your cancer team often hears questions about the potential impact of radiation therapy on pets, and this Fact Sheet includes some of the most common questions that arise.



**Can I harm my pet as a result of my radiation treatment?** Good news! In most instances the fact that you are having radiation therapy will not impact your ability to interact with your pet. However, there are three situations where you may need to speak with your cancer team.

- You need to be concerned if you are having brachytherapy. If you have a permanent radioactive implant, you are temporarily radioactive. Therefore, you should avoid having animals sitting on your lap. The amount of time you need to take precautions depends on the type of implant you receive. You will want to talk with your health care team about how long you should avoid contact between your pet and the area where the implant was placed.
- If you are being treated with radioactive iodine, it may be recommended that you do not sleep with your pets for several days or weeks. Again, speak with your health care team for the specific timeframe for your situation. You should also take care to wash your hands a bit more frequently if you are in close contact with your pets.
- If you are having a positron emission tomography, also called a PET scan, there may also be restrictions that you should discuss with your radiology team. For example, you will want to avoid close interaction with pets less than two years old, for several hours following the PET scan.

## RADIATION TREATMENT

You can empty your cat's litterbox as long as you are not receiving total-body radiation (which is typically given on an inpatient basis).

**Can my pet hurt me while I'm on treatment?** Your pet generally can't hurt you, but there are a few instances you should keep in mind. Keep your pet's nails trimmed to decrease the risk of scratches. You're usually safe to sleep in bed with your pet, but it depends where you are in your treatment and how at risk you are for severe infection. Some patients get infections and cellulitis due to scrapes from their pets. You are more likely to get a scrape if your pet moves its paws in its sleep, or if you are a person who is restless in bed and rolls onto your pet.

If you end up with a scratch or a bite and you are on active treatment, you should be evaluated at your cancer center. However, if your pet bites or scratches you and that results in a severe wound, you should be evaluated immediately at an emergency room.

In general, emptying your cat's litter box typically can't hurt you unless you are on total body radiation. That is the one radiation treatment that does significantly compromise immune function.

**Will I be able to take care of my pet when I'm undergoing radiation therapy?** Many patients on radiation treatment worry that there may be times that they don't feel well enough to take care of their pet. Fortunately, most patients receiving radiation are able to keep up with their daily activities. There aren't typically restrictions. Except in rare situations, you are not radioactive, you are not going to emit radiation, you are not going to hurt anyone in your household or your animal. In fact, you are often not immunocompromised for the most part. You can go about your normal activities.

We have good evidence that if you are able to maintain your activities, like walking a dog, it's actually very helpful for you. If you continue your normal day-to-day life and stay physically active, it's a win-win scenario. It will improve your mood and energy during treatment, and it increases your long-term health outlook, especially in terms of cardiovascular and pulmonary health.



**Some final thoughts.** Is it safe to have a pet if you are a cancer patient receiving radiation? Yes, as long as you take the correct precautions. Talk to your health care provider team and ask them any questions you may have. (See also CancerCare's "Suggested Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider Team"). Except in certain circumstances, you should be able to maintain that wonderful bond between you and your beloved pet.

### **The CancerCare® Pet Assistance and Wellness (PAW) Program**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. The financial assistance component of the CancerCare PAW Program has helped over 1,300 clients keep their pets in their homes.

This fact sheet is for people living with cancer and caring for their pets and it includes important information for them and their loved ones, as well as health care professionals and veterinarians.

For additional information please visit [www.cancercares.org/paw](http://www.cancercares.org/paw) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

**Facebook:** [facebook.com/CancerCare](https://www.facebook.com/CancerCare)

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