

Does My Indoor-Only Cat with Cancer Really Need a Rabies Vaccination?

How safe is it to have a cat vaccinated when it recently received chemotherapy? Veterinary expert, Arnold Plotnick, DVM, offers his advice.

Q: I have an 8-year-old female cat that was diagnosed with large granulocytic lymphoma two-and-a-half weeks ago. She has a mass in her stomach. She had the blood tests, chest X-ray and ultrasound. She now goes once a week for an intravenous chemotherapy infusion. I was told her liver laboratory results came back normal this week (they were elevated at the initial diagnosis). She has gained weight, the mass appears to be smaller and she is doing OK. They gave me liquid prednisone to start today because I was having difficulty getting her to take her pills.

Last night, the vet called and said not to give her any oral medication because they realized she has not had a rabies shot in 7 years, and they were fearful I might get bitten. They told me to take her to a local vet (they are a large animal hospital) and have her vaccinated today. I have some questions regarding my cat's rabies vaccination:

How safe is it to have her vaccinated today when she received her chemo yesterday? Wouldn't her immune system be suppressed? Wouldn't it be safer to wait a few days for her eating habits to increase and for her to recover from the blood tests, chemo and general hospital visit that were very traumatic for her? Also, is it possible for a cat that has never left the house to contract rabies?

A: Here's the answer I am supposed to give you: Rabies vaccination is required by law, and all cats should be current on their rabies vaccination. This protects the cat from contracting rabies, as well as protects any person or animal that might come into contact with her and get bitten. So that's my official answer.

Here's my realistic answer: You are absolutely right. When we give a vaccination, we ask the immune system to respond by producing antibodies that would protect against the disease. Chemotherapy drugs are immunosuppressive. This could result in an inadequate response to the vaccine.

Also, some rabies vaccines are "killed" vaccines, while others are "modified live" vaccines. If your vet uses a modified live vaccine, that vaccine runs a higher risk of making the cat feel ill than if a killed vaccine is used.

Frankly, to instruct a client to withhold oral chemotherapy drugs on an indoor cat for fear that you might get bitten and contract rabies is absolutely ridiculous. Unless your apartment is regularly visited by raccoons, skunks, foxes and bats, I would say it is highly unlikely that your totally indoor cat could contract rabies. Considering that your cat has an aggressive cancer with a guarded prognosis, I would recommend focusing more on giving the chemotherapy and making these last few months as comfortable for her as possible, rather than worrying about rabies.

Regards,
Arnold Plotnick, DVM