

Why we use “Off Label” drugs in our treatment of pets?

Most drugs used in the treatment of veterinary patients are licensed for use in the appropriate species. However, licensing is a costly process, and it may not be worthwhile for drug companies to license drugs which are used uncommonly. In addition, new drugs may not be licensed when first introduced. Also, some drugs may be licensed to treat one condition, but not other conditions that have been shown to benefit from treatment with the drug. For these reasons, the vet’s treating your pet may want to use drugs that are not licensed in animals, or are licensed for the treatment of other diseases, or treatment of other species. Always, the vet’s aim is to provide the best possible treatment for the patient.

Example categories of “Off Label” drugs we use:

Anaesthetics:

These are all licensed for human use, or are licensed for use in other veterinary species. We may elect to use these drugs because either there are no licensed equivalents or because we consider the drugs hold clinical advantages over the licensed equivalent. Examples of drugs we use regularly in small animals during general anaesthesia include midazolam, diazepam, morphine, methadone, and others. If possible, before surgery we will discuss the use of specific drugs with you, but there may be specific medical reasons during the surgical procedure why the veterinary surgeon chooses to use a different drug from the ones originally planned.

We may also use unlicensed drugs to ensure that patients have good pain control after surgery. In signing the consent form, you are agreeing to allow us to use any of the possible anaesthetic drugs during your pet’s surgery.

Chemotherapy:

All of these drugs are licensed for use in humans, but none of these drugs are licensed for pet species. However, many have been used for decades in dogs and cats. Examples of drugs that we may use in patients with cancer include vincristine, cyclophosphamide, L-asparaginase, epirubicin, doxorubicin, melphalan, chlorambucil, methotrexate, cytosine arabinoside, lomustine and carboplatin. When patients are admitted for chemotherapy, the clinician will discuss the planned drug treatment with you. However, there may be specific medical reasons why the clinician chooses to use a different drug from the ones originally planned (for example, a low blood cell count), or a different dose of the drug. If possible, we will discuss any changes in the plan with you prior to administering the drug. However, in signing the consent form, you are agreeing to allow us to use the chemotherapy we think most appropriate for your pet.

Drugs used on other species:

We may use drugs that are licensed in other species to treat the condition your pet has. This might be because either there are no licensed equivalents or because we think there are clinical advantages of using the unlicensed drug. If your pet has a rare disease, there may be no licensed product available. For example, there are no licensed drugs to treat Addison’s disease, a potentially fatal hormone deficiency, so a drug licensed in humans is used.

Other un-licensed:

If your pet has not responded well to the usual licensed treatment for a condition, then our vet’s may recommend trying another drug which is not licensed. For example, in severe gastric ulceration, if the patient is not responding to cimetidine, other agents (such as omeprazole may be used).