

Euthanasia of Companion Animals

The euthanasia decision for a beloved pet may be one of the most difficult choices you must face during your entire lifetime. It is hard to make a life-ending determination like this for someone who cannot tell you what his wishes are and yet a judgment call must be made. There are emotional issues such as guilt, grief, and uncertainty as well as financial and/or time commitment matters in choosing to treat or not treat an illness. Family members with differing opinions or philosophies may be involved. The decision process is arduous and everyone dreads its necessity.

You likely have questions about how to tell whether the right time has come in addition to questions about what to expect and what the procedure is. This article is meant to guide you through these difficult issues so that you can be certain in the years to come that you made the right decision without regret.

When is the Right Time?

Some pets simply become debilitated by age or disease to a point where their life quality deteriorates to an unacceptable level. This does not mean that improvement is not possible so it is important to seek counseling from your veterinarian about your pet's condition and what may be possible to improve it.

Many medical issues that seem hopeless to a pet owner are surprisingly easy to palliate or even solve. Long-standing in-home urination problems may boil down to a bladder infection that can be resolved with antibiotics or sphincter tightening remedies. Arthritis medication can yield great improvement in mobility. Non-healing wounds may represent allergy and not cancer. Every veterinarian can tell stories of pets assumed by their owners to have terminal illness that turned out to have been easily treated problems.

It is best not to make your own assumptions about the reversibility of your pet's condition. Have your veterinarian evaluate the pet before making your decision if possible. Find out what sort of supportive care you might need to perform as primary caregiver and what the associated expenses are. Avoid making assumptions on your own and get all the options.

Involve your veterinarian early. Find out treatment options and costs before making euthanasia decisions.

When You've Done all you Can: Life Quality Evaluation

As much as we hate to admit it, caregivers have limitations of what they are capable of doing and some pets are not willing to cooperate with the treatments that will help them recover. There is a point where all the love, attention, therapies, and special foods are just not enough. Saying goodbye is emotionally devastating enough without having to suffer through uncertainty in your decision.

Some people will tell you that you will simply “know” when it is time but this idea is not really fair. Determining someone else’s life quality is not completely intuitive. Fortunately, some criteria have been developed to help make evaluating life quality a little more definable.

- Does he still enjoy his favorite activities? The elderly pet does not necessarily need to continue chasing balls or jumping after Frisbees but he should enjoy sleeping comfortably, favorite resting spots, your company, etc.
- Is your pet eating? Basically, quality life involves eating or at least interest in food. An animal that is hungry has vitality that must be considered, though this is not the only consideration.
- Is your pet comfortable? The pet should be free of debilitating pains, cramps, aches or even the psychological pain that comes from the development of incontinence in an animal that has been housebroken its entire life.

After the Decision is Made

You may have some questions as to the process and if there are other options.

Should you be present for the procedure?

This is a very personal decision and there is no wrong answer. Many people simply cannot watch for emotional reasons. Others want to be sure their pet has at least one familiar family member there throughout. It is best to decide in advance which family members, if any, want to be there. Every owner wants to think of euthanasia as a gentle slipping into death much like falling asleep. While every effort is made to approximate this vision, the pet will probably not close its eyes, and there may be a final twitch or gasp. Some animals will urinate or release other body fluids as they relax. To help ease this transition between life and death, sometimes a tranquilizer is given first, thus alleviating some of the above.

How is the procedure performed?

Not all clinics have the exact same steps, but the following is typical. Appropriate forms must be signed in order for the procedure to take place. The payment transaction is done prior to the procedure so that the owner will not have to tearfully sign checks or credit card slips just following the emotional height of the procedure.

The owner and pet are then brought to the area where the euthanasia will be performed. At that time, a veterinarian speaks to the owner about the steps of the euthanasia, the timeline of each step, potential side effects and what to expect. Any questions that the owner has can be answered by the veterinarian at that time before moving forward. As an aside, an owner may also request to have these questions answered by the veterinarian by phone or appointment prior to this day in order to help alleviate stress, and to allow better understanding.

Sedation and Final injection:

Not all pets are sedated prior to euthanasia; however it is always available should the owner wish.

Dogs are normally sedated with an injection under the skin, unless they are already non-responsive. This takes effect in about 10-15 minutes, and they become more relaxed, lay down and occasionally snore. A final injection of an anesthetic agent is then given in the vein. This is what will stop their heart. The final injection usually works by the time the veterinarian is done injecting or within a minute afterwards. Most times, butterfly catheters are used, although an indwelling catheter is sometimes placed in small dogs, or dogs with short legs to allow ease of access.

Cats are usually euthanized either by intraperitoneal (IP) injection or by catheter if one is already placed. An intraperitoneal injection allows for the cat to receive the final injection and only get injected once. The anesthetic agent slowly diffuses through their system and sedates them over a few minutes and then when enough has been absorbed, will stop their heart. If a euthanasia is taking too long a second injection either by IP or IV access can be given at that point in time. If you would like your cat to be sedated either at home or by injection prior to receiving an IP injection, please speak to the veterinarian about this prior to the euthanasia.

The procedure itself is very fast. The euthanasia solution, generally dyed a bright color so that it cannot be mistaken for anything else, is delivered and death comes peacefully. The owner is allowed to remain with the pet for final private goodbyes.

At the end of this time after the last goodbyes and caresses are completed, the owner simply exits the room when ready and the hospital staff takes over.

Let your veterinarian know in advance if you would like a lock of hair or the collar as a keepsake.

Home Euthanasia

Some clinics provide this service, but there are also house call euthanasia services in some areas.

Aftercare

After the procedure is over, there are some options regarding your pet's remains. In some municipalities, city ordinances preclude burying pets at home. Otherwise, a cremation service is used. Typically you can choose between a group cremation and an individual one. In a group cremation, you do not receive any ashes. An individual one will cost more, but you will have your pets' ashes.

This article was adapted from the Companion Animal Euthanasia article written by [Wendy Brooks, DVM, DABVP](#), 08/25/2003.