

## How do I know it's time? Pet euthanasia

Perhaps the kindest thing you can do for a pet that is extremely ill or so severely injured that it will never be able to resume a life of good quality is to have your veterinarian induce its death quietly and humanely through euthanasia. Your decision to have your pet euthanatized is a serious one, and is seldom easy to make.

### *What should I do?*

Your relationship with your pet is special, and you are responsible for your pet's care and welfare. Eventually, many owners are faced with making life-or-death decisions for their pets. Such a decision may become necessary for the welfare of the pet and your family.

A decision concerning euthanasia may be one of the most difficult decisions you will ever make for your pet. Although a personal decision, it need not be a solitary one. Your veterinarian and your family and close friends can help you make the right decision. Consider not only what is best for your pet, but also what is best for you and your family. Quality of life is important for pets and people alike.

### *How will I know when?*

If your pet can no longer experience the things it once enjoyed, cannot respond to you in its usual ways, or appears to be experiencing more pain than pleasure, you may need to consider euthanasia. Likewise, if your pet is terminally ill or critically injured, or if the financial or emotional cost of treatment is beyond your means, euthanasia may be a valid option.

Your veterinarian understands human attachment to pets, and can examine and evaluate your pet's condition, estimate its chances for recovery, and discuss its potential disabilities and long-term problems. He or she can explain medical and surgical options and possible outcomes. Because your veterinarian cannot make the euthanasia decision for you, it is important that you fully understand your pet's condition. If there is any part of the diagnosis or the implications for your pet's future that you don't understand, ask to have it explained again. Rarely will the situation require an immediate decision and usually you will have some time to review the facts before making one.

Once the decision for euthanasia has been made, you may wish to discuss the care of the remains of your pet's body with your veterinarian and your family. Your veterinarian can provide information about burial, cremation, and other alternatives.

### *What if the animal is healthy?*

Euthanasia might be necessary if a pet has become vicious, dangerous, or unmanageable. Some undesirable and abnormal behavior can be changed, so it is important to discuss these situations with your veterinarian.

Economic, emotional, and space limitations or changes in lifestyle also may cause an owner to consider euthanasia for their pet. Sometimes it is possible to find another home for the pet and that option should be pursued prior to opting for euthanasia. Euthanasia should be considered only when alternatives are not available.

### *How do I tell my family?*

Family members usually are already aware of a pet's problems. However, you should review with them the information you have received from your veterinarian. Long-term medical care can be a burden that you and your family may be unable to bear emotionally or financially, and this should

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be discussed openly and honestly. Encourage family members to express their thoughts and feelings. Even if you have reached a decision, it is important that family members, especially children, have their thoughts and feelings considered.

Children have special relationships with their pets. Excluding or protecting children from this decision-making process, because they are thought to be too young to understand may only complicate and prolong their grief process. Children respect straightforward, truthful, and simple answers. If they are prepared adequately, children usually are able to accept a pet's death.

### *Will it be painless?*

Euthanasia is most often accomplished for pets by injection of a death-inducing drug. Your veterinarian may administer a tranquilizer first to relax your pet. Following injection of the euthanasia drug, your pet will immediately become deeply and irreversibly unconscious. Death will be quick and painless.

### *How can I say goodbye?*

The act of saying goodbye is an important step in managing the natural and healthy feelings of grief, sorrow, and loss. Your pet is an important part of your life and it is natural to feel you are losing a friend or companion, because you are.

Once the euthanasia decision has been made, you and other family members may want to say goodbye to your pet. A last evening with your pet at home or a visit to the pet at the hospital may be appropriate. Family members who want to be alone with the pet should be allowed to do so. Farewells are always difficult.

### *How can I face the loss?*

After your pet has died, it is natural and normal to feel grief and sorrow. For some people, spending some time with the pet after euthanasia is helpful. The grieving process includes accepting the reality of your loss, accepting that the loss and accompanying feelings are painful, and adjusting to your new life that no longer includes your pet. By understanding the grieving process, you will be better prepared to manage your grief and to help others in the family who share this loss.

There are many stages of grief, but not everyone experiences them all or in the same order. **Denial** may begin when you first learn the seriousness of your pet's illness or injuries. Often, the more sudden the death, the more difficult the loss is to accept.

**Anger and guilt** often follow denial. Your anger may be directed toward people you normally love and respect, including your family and your veterinarian. People coping with death will often say things that they do not really mean, perhaps hurting those whom they do not mean to hurt. You may blame yourself or others for not recognizing the illness earlier, for not doing something sooner, for not being able to afford other types of or further treatment, or for being careless and allowing the pet to be injured.

**Depression** You also may feel depressed. The tears flow, there are knots in your stomach, and you feel drained of all your energy. Day-to-day tasks can seem impossible to perform. Sometimes you may even ask yourself if you can go on without your pet. The answer is yes, but there are times when special assistance may be helpful in dealing with your loss.

Once you and your family come to terms with your feelings, you can begin to **resolve and accept** your pet's death. When you have reached resolution and acceptance, the feelings of denial, anger, guilt, and depression may reappear. If this does happen, these feelings will usually be less intense, and with time will be replaced with fond memories.

Although the stages of grief apply fairly universally, grieving is always a personal process. Some people take longer than others to come to terms with denial, anger, guilt, and depression, and each loss is different. If you understand that these are normal reactions, you will be better prepared to cope with your own feelings and to help others face theirs. Family members should be reassured that sorrow and grief are normal and natural responses to death.

### ***They may not understand***

Sometimes well-meaning family and friends may not realize how important your pet was to you or the intensity of your grief. Comments they make may seem cruel and uncaring. Be honest with yourself and others about how you feel. If despair mounts, talk to someone who will listen to your feelings about the loss of your pet. Talk about your sorrow, but also about the fun times you and the pet spent together, the activities you enjoyed, and the memories that are meaningful.

### ***I cannot forget***

If you or a family member have great difficulty in accepting your pet's death and cannot resolve feelings of grief and sorrow, you may want to discuss those feelings with a person who is trained to understand the grieving process, such as a grief counselor, clergyman, social worker, physician, or psychologist. Your veterinarian certainly understands the relationship you have lost and may be able to direct you to community resources, such as a support group or hot line.

### ***Should I get another pet?***

The death of a pet can upset you emotionally, especially when euthanasia is involved. Some people may feel they would never want another pet. For others, a new pet may help them recover from their loss more quickly. Just as grief is a personal experience, the decision of when, if ever, to bring a new pet into your home is also a personal one. If a family member is having difficulty accepting the pet's death, getting a new animal before that person has resolved his or her grief may imply that the life of the deceased pet was unworthy of the grief that that is still being felt. Family members should agree on the appropriate time to acquire a new pet. Although you can never replace the pet you lost, you can obtain another one to share your life.

### ***Remembering your pet***

The period from birth to old age is much shorter for pets than for people. Death is part of the lifecycle. It cannot be avoided, but understanding and compassion can help you, your family, and your friends manage the grief associated with it. Try to recall and treasure the good times you spent with your pet. You may also wish to establish a memorial of some type or contribute to a charity in honor of your pet.

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