

Euthanasia: Making the Decision

While some pets die of old age in the comfort of their own home, many others become seriously ill, get injured in some way or experience a significantly diminished quality of life as they grow very old. In these situations, it may be necessary for you to consider having your pet euthanized in order to spare it from pain and suffering. Here are some suggestions for dealing with this difficult decision, as well as some information about the euthanasia procedure itself.

Knowing when it's time

Talk to your veterinarian. He or she is the best-qualified person to help guide you through this difficult process. In some cases, your veterinarian may be able to tell you definitively that it is time to euthanize your pet, but in other cases, you may ultimately need to make the decision based on your observations of your pet's behavior and attitude. Here are some signs that may indicate your pet is suffering or no longer enjoying a good quality of life:

- He is experiencing chronic pain that cannot be controlled with medication (your veterinarian can help you determine if your pet is in pain).
- He has frequent vomiting or diarrhea that is causing dehydration and/or significant weight loss.
- He has stopped eating or will only eat if you force feed him.
- He is incontinent to the degree that he frequently soils himself.
- He has lost interest in all or most of his favorite activities, such as going for walks, playing with toys or other pets, eating treats or soliciting attention and petting from family members.
- He cannot stand on his own or falls down when trying to walk.
- He has chronic labored breathing or coughing.

Saying goodbye

Once you have made this very difficult decision, you will also need to decide how and where you and your family will say the final goodbye.

- Before the procedure is scheduled to take place, make sure that all members of your family have time with the pet to say a private goodbye.
- If you have children, make sure that you explain the decision to them and prepare them for the loss of the pet in advance. This may be your child's first experience with death, and it is very important for you to help her or him through the grieving process. Books that address the subject, such as *When a Pet Dies* by Fred Rogers or *Remembering My Pet* by Machama Liss-Levinson and Molly Phinney Baskette, may be very beneficial in helping your child to deal with this loss.
- It is an individual decision whether or not you and your family want to be present during the euthanasia procedure. For some pet owners, the emotion may be too overwhelming, but for many, it is a comfort to be with their pet during the final

- moments. It may be inappropriate for young children to witness the procedure since they are not yet able to understand death and may also not understand that they need to remain still and quiet.
- Some veterinarians will come to your house, which allows both the pet and the family to share their last moments together in the comfort of their own home.

What to expect

Making the decision to say goodbye to a beloved pet is stressful, and your anxiety can often be exacerbated if you do not know what to expect during the euthanasia procedure.

- Your veterinarian will generally explain the procedure to you before he or she begins. Don't hesitate to ask your veterinarian for further explanation or clarification if needed.
- Small to medium-size pets are usually placed on a table for the procedure, but larger dogs may be more easily handled on the floor. Regardless of the location, make sure that your pet has a comfortable blanket or bed to lie on.
- In most cases, a trained veterinary technician will hold your pet for the procedure. The veterinary technician has the skill needed to properly hold your pet so that the process goes quickly and smoothly. If you plan to be present during the entire procedure, it is important that you allow enough space for the veterinarian and technician to work. Your veterinarian will probably show you where to stand so that your pet can see you and hear your voice.
- Your veterinarian will give your pet an overdose of an anesthetic drug called sodium pentobarbital, which quickly causes unconsciousness and then gently stops the heartbeat. Your veterinarian will draw the correct dose of the drug into a syringe and then inject it into a vein. In dogs, the front leg is most commonly used. In cats, either the front or rear leg may be used. The injection itself is not painful to your pet.
- Often, veterinarians will place an intravenous (IV) catheter in the pet's vein before giving the injection. The catheter will reduce the risk that the vein will rupture as the drug is injected. If the vein ruptures, then some of the drug may leak out into the leg, and it will not work as quickly.
- Your veterinarian may give your pet an injection of anesthetic or sedative before the injection of sodium pentobarbital. This is most often done in pets that are not likely to hold still for the IV injection. An anesthetic or sedative injection is usually given in the rear leg muscle and will take effect in about five to 10 minutes. Your pet will become very drowsy or unconscious, allowing the veterinarian to more easily perform the IV injection.
- Once the IV injection of sodium pentobarbital is given, your pet will become completely unconscious within a few seconds, and death will occur within a few minutes or less.
- Your veterinarian will use a stethoscope to confirm that your pet's heart has stopped.

- Your pet may experience some muscle twitching and intermittent breathing for several minutes after death has occurred. Your pet may also release his bladder or bowels. These events are normal and should not be cause for alarm.
- After your veterinarian has confirmed that your pet has passed, he or she will usually ask if you would like to have a few final minutes alone with your pet.

Burial and cremation options

Your veterinarian can offer you a variety of options for your pet's final resting place.

- Cremation is the most popular choice, and you can choose whether or not you would like to have your pet's ashes returned to you. Most cremation services offer a choice of urns and personalized memorials.
- Burial is another option. You may want to bury your pet in your own yard, but before doing so, be sure to check your local ordinances for any restrictions. There are also many pet cemeteries throughout the United States. To locate a pet cemetery near you, check with the [International Association of Pet Cemeteries](#).