

Euthanasia advice

No-one likes to think about the day that their pet will be put to sleep. Many often hope that their elderly pet will gently pass away in their sleep one night without the dreaded decision and vet visit. Unfortunately, in reality most pets will suffer to some extent before they die naturally. Knowing the details and options available before the time comes to make a decision will make that upsetting time just a little bit easier for you and hopefully limit any distress to your pet.

Deciding on the right time

Making the decision when to euthanase a much-loved pet can seem like a straight-forward or incredibly difficult choice, but is always traumatic. If they are elderly and have suddenly deteriorated, for example they are no longer able to get up, they are in significant pain, they are struggling to breathe or they have a condition which requires surgery to maintain quality of life, then many people feel there is little decision to make. However, even in these cases it can be a difficult decision as modern veterinary medicine often provides options such as surgery, medications or trials of pain killers.

Never feel that your vet is trying to lead you down one path or another; it is our duty to provide you with all the options, the details of what is involved and potential outcomes. One option never suits every case - you may not wish your pet to go through surgery or have medications, while someone else may. The individual nature of your pet is incredibly important; some are relaxed and happy to be left with us in the practice, while others get very stressed as soon as they arrive in the car park. No-one knows your pet as well as you do and so you are best placed to decide what is right for you and your pet. We are happy to give as much or as little guidance as you wish.

If surgery is an option then there is always the possibility that your pet may not survive or that we contact you to report that the problem is inoperable and that it would be kinder not to wake them up from the anaesthetic. If you definitely want to be present with your pet at the end, then anaesthesia and surgery is probably not a good option for you. It is important never to feel pressurised into making a rushed decision; if you want more time to consider your options then please ask for this.

Your decision becomes even harder when your pet is gradually deteriorating and palliative care is the only option. This can occur with advanced osteoarthritis, kidney, liver or heart disease or with cancer where surgery or chemotherapy is not appropriate. We often see cases where change is so slow that one day is very like the one before and the one before that. If people could look into the future and see how their pet would be in a month's time, they would not want them to deteriorate to that stage. However, without a sudden change in their condition it can be very difficult to decide when is the right time. Do not expect your pet to cry or howl if they are in pain, some simply become withdrawn and subdued. Questions worth asking yourself are:

- 1) Is he/she still capable of and enjoying going for a walk?
- 2) Are they still eating well and getting excited when food is presented?
- 3) Are they still pleased to see you if you have been out of the house for a period?
- 4) Are they interacting with you and/or other pets?
- 5) Are they showing obvious signs of pain and if so can this be controlled with painkillers?
- 6) Ultimately, are they taking enjoyment from life or simply 'going through the motions' i.e. do they have a quality of life?

Location

Some people would rather have their pet put to sleep in their own environment at home, whereas others choose to bring their pet to the practice. If you would rather not remember your pet being put to sleep at home, but find the practice building too clinical then we can come out to you in the car park. Some pets are more relaxed if they stay on their bed in the car, and if the weather is nice then finding a quiet spot on the grass in front of or behind the practice building can be very peaceful.

We will always try to accommodate a request for a home visit wherever possible. However, if this is out of hours and we are operating or monitoring a critical patient then we might not be able to leave the premises immediately. If your pet has a chronic condition and you would like a specific vet to visit, then arranging the visit a few days in advance gives the best chance of this being organised. This is of course not always possible if your pet's condition has suddenly changed.

The euthanasia procedure

Once you have decided that euthanasia is the best option for your pet, it can feel like a relief. However, no matter how prepared you feel, when the time comes it will be an emotional and upsetting experience. If you would rather not be present at the time then be assured that your pet will be treated with dignity and compassion. A vet and nurse will be present to reassure your pet throughout.

The injection used is an overdose of an anaesthetic so your pet will feel like they are going to sleep. If this is given intravenously then it acts within seconds, giving your pet a peaceful and dignified end. A small section of hair is clipped from your pet's front leg and spirit is used to highlight the vein. The clippers can sound loud and the spirit can feel cold - if your pet finds this upsetting then we will give them adequate time to settle before continuing. Some respond to the distraction of food while others simply seek some reassurance.

The nurse will raise your pet's vein by putting pressure around their leg. Some vets then inject straight into the vein while others prefer to place an intravenous catheter in first. If the vein is too small or fragile to take the injection then sometimes the other front leg is used instead. If your pet gets too stressed by the procedure or their veins cannot take the injection then a sedative can be given into the muscle. The injection is quick and any associated discomfort is short-lived. You will then be left with your pet so that they have the best conditions to relax and become sleepy. The sedative can cause your pet's blood pressure to drop - if this makes their vein too small then the euthanasia injection can be given into the belly. This is painless and although it takes significantly longer to have an effect than if given intravenously, the priority is keeping the procedure as stress-free as possible for your pet.

Once your pet has lost consciousness it is not uncommon for them to 'gasp' or 'twitch'. This is a normal involuntary reflex which can continue for a minute or two; your pet will not be aware that it is happening but it can be upsetting for you if you are unaware it can occur. Their eyes usually remain open and their bladder sometimes empties. Please take every opportunity to hold, stroke and speak to your pet throughout the procedure, if you wish to. If your pet gets so distressed that he or she becomes aggressive then every effort will be made to avoid using a muzzle; they are however sometimes necessary for the safety of everyone involved.

After your vet has listened for a heart beat and confirmed that your pet has passed away, we will then leave the room to give you a chance to say a final goodbye. Take as long as you need at this point, you should never be rushed. Once you are ready, we will let you out the side door so you do not have to pass by other people in the waiting room. Do not be embarrassed at showing your emotions; we expect you to feel upset.

Cremation

At the start of the consultation your vet will ask you to sign a form to confirm that you give your consent. One of the questions on the form will be whether you want your pet to be buried at home or cremated. We can organise a communal or individual cremation for your pet. Some people find photos and memories are the best ways to remember your pet, others consider an individual cremation to be more helpful. If you wish for an individual cremation then your pet's ashes will either be returned in a pot for scattering or in a sealed wooden casket with an engraving of your pet's name.

It is easier for you if you have decided which suits you best prior to the consult but if it was unexpected or you haven't made your mind up yet then you can always contact us the following day with your decision. If we have visited you at home and you wish for a cremation then we will take your pet with us back to the practice. You will be given the same opportunity to spend some time saying goodbye that you would have if your pet was put to sleep at the practice. If you requested an individual cremation then we will contact you once your pet's ashes are available for collection.

We have used Lawnhill Pet Crematorium for some years and have built up a good relationship with this family-run business. One of our vets has visited their premises personally and been impressed with their facilities and, more importantly, their attitude and compassion. They guarantee that only the ashes of your pet are returned following an individual cremation. They are very happy for you to visit yourself with your pet for cremation and have a small wooden chalet where you can spend some time to say goodbye. There is a peaceful area with a pond and a small wood where you can choose to scatter your pet's ashes. Alternatively, they will collect your pet from our practice. More details and photos can be found at www.lawnhillpetcrematorium.co.uk.

Bereavement

Do not underestimate how upsetting losing a pet can be. They are a member of your family and are always greatly missed. Consider taking some time off work but remember that your house will feel very different without your pet's presence. Other pets in the household can also be affected. It is unknown whether letting them see and smell your pet following euthanasia helps them, but if you think this would then please do not hesitate to ask.

People cope with losing a pet in different ways; it can help to talk to family and friends about it. Unfortunately, people who do not own a pet sometimes struggle to appreciate how traumatising the event can be. If it would help to speak to your pet afterwards then this will always be arranged. You may have questions about your pet's condition or the experience itself which you did not think to ask at the time. If you find you are struggling to come to terms with your loss then the Blue Cross provide a telephone helpline and email service manned by trained volunteers who have personally experienced pet bereavement (the Pet Bereavement Support Service, PBSS). More details can be found at www.bluecross.org.uk.

