

# Euthanasia

John White & Gill Minter We are never quite prepared for the death of a pet. Whether death is swift and unexpected or whether it comes at the end of a slow decline, we are never fully aware of what a pet has brought to our lives until our companion is gone. Our involvement with the final outcome may be passive. We may simply not pursue medical or surgical treatment in an aging pet. Perhaps its ailment has no cure and the best we can do is alleviate some of its suffering so that it may live the remainder of its days in relative comfort. An illness or accident may take it suddenly.

Everyone secretly hopes for a pet's peaceful passing, hoping to find it lying in its favorite spot in the morning. Ideally we would like our pets to die peacefully in their sleep, and indeed many do. The impact of a pet's death is significantly increased when, as responsible and loving caretakers, we decide to have the pet euthanized.

Euthanasia is the induction of painless death and literally means 'gentle death'. Other terms you may hear are 'put to sleep', 'put down', 'put out of its misery' or, less kindly, 'destroy'. Veterinary staff may use the term 'humane destruction' which is simply a technical term for putting an animal to sleep. In veterinary practice, it is accomplished by intravenous injection of a concentrated dose of anesthetic.

The decision to end a life is never easy. It is a personal, loving decision to euthanize a pet for which the quality of life has deteriorated. It takes courage to assume this last duty and it is our last responsibility to a pet which has given us love and companionship. There is also no easy human comparison. The bond between pet and owner is a very special one. It is easy to become emotionally caught up in keeping your pet alive when you know that there is no hope of him regaining his health.

The animal may feel slight discomfort when the needle tip passes through the skin, but this is no greater than for any other injection. The euthanasia solution takes only seconds to induce a total loss of consciousness. This is soon followed by respiratory depression and cardiac arrest.

Doctors of veterinary medicine do not exercise this option lightly. Their medical training and professional lives are dedicated to diagnosis and treatment of disease. Veterinarians are keenly aware of the balance between extending an animal's life and its suffering. Euthanasia is the ultimate tool to mercifully end a pet's suffering.

To request euthanasia of a pet is probably the most difficult decision a pet owner can make. All the stages of mourning may flood together, alternating rapidly. We may resent the position of power. We may feel angry at our pet for forcing us to make the decision. We may postpone the decision, bargaining with ourselves that if we wait another day, the decision will not be necessary. Guilt sits heavily on the one who must decide. The fundamental guideline is to do what is best for your pet, even if you suffer in doing this. Remember that as much as your pet has the right to a painless death, you have the right to live a happy life.

Each of us mourns differently, some more privately than others, and some recover more quickly. Some pet owners find great comfort in acquiring a new pet soon after the loss of another. Others, however, become angry at the suggestion of another pet. They may feel that they are being disloyal to the memory of the preceding pet. Do not rush into selecting a replacement pet. Take the time to work through your grief.

To help you to prepare for the decision to euthanize your pet, consider the following questions. They are intended as a guide; only you can decide what is the best solution for you and your pet. Take your time. Speak with your veterinarian. Which choice will bring you the least cause for regret after the pet is gone?

Consider the following:

- " What is the current quality of my pet's life?
- " Is my pet still eating well? Playful? Affectionate toward me?
- " Is my pet interested in the activity surrounding it?
- " Does my pet seem tired and withdrawn most of the time?
- " Is my pet in pain?
- " Is there anything I can do to make my pet more comfortable?
- " Are any other treatment options available?
- " If a behavioral problem has led me to this decision, have I sought the expertise of a veterinary behavior consultant?
- " Do I still love my pet the way I used to, or am I angry and resentful of the restrictions its condition has placed on my lifestyle?
- " Does my pet sense that I am withdrawing from it?
- " What is the quality of my life and how will this change?
- " Will I want to be present during the euthanasia?
- " Will I say goodbye to my pet before the euthanasia because it is too painful for me to assist?
- " Will I want to wait in the reception area until it is over?
- " Do I want to be alone or should I ask a friend to be present?

" Do I want any special burial arrangements made?

" Can my veterinarian store the body so that I can delay burial arrangements until later?

" Do I want to adopt another pet?

" Do I need time to recover from this loss before even considering another pet?

Making the decision The decision almost always causes much soul-searching, especially if you and your pet have been companions for several years. What matters to the pet is quality of life not length of life since a pet has little concept of future time. An illness may be treatable for a period of time, but there eventually comes a point when the pet no longer enjoys life. He may be in visible distress or withdrawn. Having seen your pet when he is happy and healthy, most owners recognize the signs given by a pet which is miserable. Your vet will be able to tell you whether the pet has a treatable ailment or is approaching the end of his life.

The Warning Signs are:

- \* Not eating or drinking
- \* Withdrawn or lethargic
- \* Neglecting himself
- \* Incontinence
- \* Signs of pain - he may cry out if touched
- \* Cannot get comfortable
- \* Unwilling to move about
- \* Tumours or injuries
- \* Unable to hold head up when at rest
- \* A known terminal illness or condition such as Feline Leukemia, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, Feline Infectious Peritonitis, kidney/liver failure or cancer.

Since some of these can also be symptoms of treatable illness, you need to discuss your pet's welfare with your vet. He will be able to advise you and help you to make the right decision for your pet, but he cannot make the decision for you.

A Last Goodbye

Sometimes it is possible to delay euthanasia for a day without causing suffering for example where the pet has a terminal illness or is extremely old and the euthanasia is planned in advance. You may wish to give your pet a last night of pampering, his favorite foods or foods which were normally forbidden. This is a time in which to say goodbye and reassure him that he is very much loved. However, if he is suffering, or is already under anesthetic, he will not enjoy having his misery prolonged.

### How Quickly Does It Happen ?

The answer is very quickly. The pet loses consciousness within seconds of the injection starting and death follows a few seconds later. If you are holding the pet, you will feel him exhale, relax and become heavier in your arms. Urine may trickle from his bladder as the muscles relax. The vet will check for a pulse or eyelid-flick reflex and if there is any chance at all that the pet is deeply unconscious, he will give a second injection into a kidney or the heart. Your pet will not be aware of a second injection if it is needed.

Most vets will place the pet into a natural looking sleeping position (he will look as if he has fallen asleep) and close his eyes since animals do not always close their eyes when they die. Because all the muscles of the face have relaxed, his lips may pull back into what looks like a grimace. This is simply due to relaxation of the muscles and to gravity and is not a sign of pain, but it can cause concern if you did not expect it.

### Should I Stay To The End?

This is a personal decision. Some owners feel that it is their last duty to be there. Others prefer not to be present. Many take a friend or family member with them for emotional support.

Most vets will allow you to remain with your pet during euthanasia if you wish. If he does not want you present, ask why and ask if another vet at the practice can perform the euthanasia with you present. If you become distressed then this will upset your pet and make it harder to handle which is traumatic for all concerned. Your vet understands that this is a difficult time and he will only ask you to leave if you become so upset that it is impossible for him to perform the euthanasia. If you remain calm this will reassure your pet and make the end very peaceful.

Not all owners wish to be present and there is no shame in this. Some people simply cannot stand the sight of injections. Your vet will allow you to say goodbye to your pet and leave the consulting room. If you are taking your pet's body away with you, he will call you back in afterwards. Your pet will be treated with as much respect and dignity whether or not you are present. If you have provided a towel or blanket, your vet will normally wrap or cover your pet's body. Otherwise, he may place him in a black bag. This is not a sign of disrespect, it is for hygiene and your own privacy. A few veterinary practices have a place where you can sit for a few minutes afterwards and regain your composure. If you do need a few moments before you are able to leave the surgery, tell

the veterinary assistant. Alternatively they may be able to help you back to your car, but bear in mind that they are unlikely to have the time to sit with you.

### Can I Have My Pet Put To Sleep At Home?

If you are willing to pay a call out fee, your vet may euthanize your pet in your own home. Both you and your pet may find this less traumatic than waiting at the vets surgery. However, locating your pet when the vet arrives may be a problem as he knows the best hiding places. In the case of a home visit where a veterinary nurse is not available, and the vet does not feel that you are able to restrain the pet, he may sedate the pet first and then inject into the kidney or heart. This is less distressing for all concerned than trying to restrain an agitated pet.

Do not be surprised if your vet makes a hasty exit afterwards, he does not want to intrude upon your grief and he will have other calls to make.

### Do Pets Know What Is About To Happen?

If you are agitated or upset, your pet will detect this and become upset himself. However, he does not know why you are upset and he does not know that this visit to the vet is any different from other visits e.g. for vaccinations.

### A final resting place

If death is sudden or unexpected, a distraught owner may have difficulty in deciding how to dispose of their pet's body. Where possible, you should discuss this while the pet is alive and reach a shared family decision which will not later be regretted. Your veterinarian will explain the options which are available to you but, in general, these fall in to four main categories: burial at home (not permitted in some countries), burial in a pet cemetery, individual cremation (where the ashes are returned to you in a casket), and communal cremation (which is how most pets are routinely disposed of by vets).