EUTHANASIA AND END OF LIFE CHOICES

What is euthanasia?
Euthanasia is from the Greek and it means “good death.” Euthanasia is often called “putting an animal to sleep.” It is the act of inducing humane death in an animal, done with the highest degree of respect, and as painless and distress free as possible, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association guidelines. In practice, it means a veterinarian gives an injection that causes an animal to peacefully die in order to relieve pain and suffering.

How do I know if it’s time?
Quality of life is a good guideline. Is your pet still showing interest in the things around him or her, or is he or she having more bad days than good days? If the pet has an overall poor quality of life or is suffering, ideally the pet should be evaluated by a veterinarian to see what is wrong or if anything can be done to help. Sometimes treatments like pain medicine for a stiff, arthritic animal, or regular fluid administration for an animal with kidney failure can make them feel much better. If medical treatments are unsuccessful or unlikely to be effective, euthanasia may be the kindest choice. Quality of life involves how the animal feels overall, whether any pain or discomfort is manageable, if the animal still enjoys favorite activities like being brushed, sitting in your lap, or going on a walk, or more. Is the pet experiencing a lot of pain and suffering that can’t be relieved with medicines, massage, acupuncture, warm compresses or anything else? Sometimes it is okay to experience a degree of temporary pain when we expect that there will be improvement, such as after surgery to fix a broken bone, or in another illness that can be treated. If pain is constant and severe, however, the pet’s quality of life will suffer and euthanasia may be the most humane option. Claws & Paws has a worksheet that can help you evaluate your pet’s quality of life.

How do I know if this is the right decision?
The decision to euthanize a pet is often difficult, and there are no right or wrong answers. Please let your veterinarian know if you are wondering if your pet is suffering and if it may be time to consider euthanasia. We can examine your pet, and we will also ask questions to evaluate how he or she is doing at home and his or her overall quality of life. At the end of the day, you know your pet best, and any caring decision you make will be the right one, no matter how tough it may be.

What does the process entail?
When you arrive at the clinic, we will have you sign a form giving us permission to euthanize your pet, and you will be asked whether you would like to bury or cremate his or her remains afterwards. You will then be shown to an exam room, and the veterinarian may choose to sedate your pet (with an injection) and possibly place an intravenous (IV) catheter, or simply give the euthanasia drug as an IV injection depending on the situation. If a sedative is used, you can say your goodbyes while your pet is getting sleepy over 10-15 minutes, or if you choose to stay, you can be there for the entire process. After your pet is sleepy, if you choose to stay, the doctor will give your pet an intravenous (IV) injection of the euthanasia solution. This injection causes animals to become unconscious (fall asleep), after which they do not feel anything or experience any pain or discomfort. In seconds, the drug then stops brain function, and the pet will slow or stop breathing and the heart will stop beating. Animals usually lose consciousness within a few seconds to minutes after the injection of the euthanasia solution. The process may take longer (several minutes) in an extremely weak or ill animal due to poor circulation.
Will my pet feel pain during the process?
No, the euthanasia process is not painful. The only discomfort your pet will feel is a small needle poke, which is the same as getting a vaccine or drawing a blood sample - a momentary pinch. If we place an IV catheter, they will not feel any discomfort as we give them the euthanasia solution. The pet will feel sleepy, fall asleep, and then will not feel anything else afterward as they peacefully pass away. Sometimes movement, muscle twitches, a hiccup, or urination or defecation are observed, but these are involuntary, and occur after the animal is already unconscious and starting to pass away, as the body releases energy and tension.

Can I be present during the procedure?
Yes, if you would like to be there. Whether or not to be present for the actual euthanasia is a very personal decision, and there is no right or wrong answer. If you do want to be present, often we will place an intravenous (IV) catheter beforehand, so that you can pet and stroke your pet without us being in the way while we give the final injection. If you do not want to be present, you can spend a few minutes together with your pet while the sedative is taking effect (if a sedative is used).

What should I tell my children, and should they be present?
At the end of the day, what to tell your children and whether they should be present for the euthanasia is up to you as a parent to use your best judgment. Telling young children the facts without extra details is usually best. For example, “Fluffy was very old and sick, and we did everything we could, but unfortunately he died.” Generally, it is best to not use the phrase “put to sleep,” since small children don’t know what that means and may be scared at bedtime. It can also be problematic to say that “the doctor will make Fluffy all better” because children may not understand that we are relieving suffering and pain, and may blame the veterinarian for Fluffy’s death.

This may make them scared to bring pets to the vet in the future. For children younger than 8 or 9 years old, it is probably easiest if they are not present for the euthanasia. Whether older children should be there depends on their maturity, relationship with the pet, and what you as the parent think is best. Children can also accompany you and the pet to the hospital, say their goodbyes, and then wait with our staff in the waiting room if you prefer.

What happens afterward?
It can be hard to think about, but you will need to decide whether you want to bury your pet at home, or if you want his or her remains cremated after he is euthanized. Sometimes the city you live in may even have rules about this. For example, (as of the printing of this handout) the city of Pearland allows you to bury a pet on your property, but the city of Alvin strictly forbids burying a pet. Check with your local animal control if you have questions. Having your pet’s remains cremated may be a better option for you if you cannot or do not want to bury your pet at home, or if digging a deep enough hole (minimum 3 feet deep for a small pet) will be difficult. You can have the cremated remains returned to you in a decorative urn or box, or you can have your pet cremated without having the remains returned to you. It may be easier to decide ahead of time what you would like to do, because it may be too emotional a time after the euthanasia to make decisions like this.
**What is the grieving process like?**

Different people can have very different feelings after the loss of a pet. The most important thing to remember is that there is no wrong way to feel, and you should give yourself time to grieve for your pet. Feelings of sadness and loss are normal, as is worrying if you made the right decision. You may also be surprised by a feeling of relief if your pet suffered a long, difficult illness – this is normal too, and you should not feel guilty for feeling this way. If you have children, this may be their first experience with death, and although difficult, it can be an opportunity to discuss death and your personal views of what comes after. Sometimes it can be helpful (especially for children) to express grief in a physical way, such as saying a few words in memory of your pet during the burial, drawing pictures, writing a letter to the pet, or making a scrapbook.

**What resources are available to me?**

Sometimes it can feel as if we are alone in our grief, but that is not the case. Everyone who has pets will experience the loss of a pet at some time or other. However, since everyone grieves differently, you may find that some of your friends and family do not understand how you feel. “It was just a dog” etc. If you think about it, it is perfectly natural that we should feel sad after losing a furry companion we saw every day for years – how many people outside your immediate family have you spent that much time with? If you need someone to talk to, there are many pet loss support hotlines with trained grief counselors you can call, and there are some pet loss support groups as well. And of course, do not hesitate to call us if you can’t find the resources you need. It may not seem so at first, but as time passes, you will be able to think of all the happy times you and your pet shared without feeling the sharp pain of his or her absence.

**Can my veterinarian help me decide when to let go?**

Veterinarians are often asked to help pet owners with the heart-breaking decisions about euthanasia. Your veterinarian is there to help with these very difficult decisions.

**Pet Loss Hotlines and Support Groups**

**Houston SPCA Pet Loss Support Group**
Meets the First Tuesday of Each Month at 7:00pm
900 Portway Drive, Houston
(713) 869-7722 – Stacey Wilbanks (Extension 127)
http://www.houstonspca.org

**S.A.P.P.Y. Pet Loss / Grief Support Group of S.A.**
Meets Every Tuesday at 6:30pm
6877 Bandera Road, San Antonio
(210) 216-0920 – sappypetloss@sbcglobal.net
http://sappypetlosssupportgroup.blogspot.com/

**The Humane Society of Austin & Travis County**
Meets the Last Monday of each Month at 7:00pm
124 West Anderson Lane, Austin
(512) 837-7985 – Lisa Starr (Extension 226)
http://www.austinhumane.org/

**Grief Support Group at the SPCA of Texas**
Meets the First Saturday of Each Month at 1:00pm
362 S. Industrial Blvd, Dallas
(888) ANIMALS – Diane Pomerance, Ph.D. Certified Grief Recovery Specialist (Extension 172)
http://www.spcatx.org

*Visit Our Website For Additional Information and Resources*
Quality of Life Scale

Each and every pet has certain needs that should be recognized and respected. Quality of life is a way to refer to and discuss the day-to-day life and lifestyle of a dog reaching the end of its life.

If we can successfully meet an ailing or chronically ill dog’s basic needs, then we can feel confident that our efforts in preserving life are justified.

What does each category mean for a pet approaching the end of its life? Using a scale of 1 (poor) to 10 (best), pets can be scored. A total score of 35 or higher is considered an acceptable quality of life level.

The HHHHHMM scale:

Hurt - Adequate pain control, including the ability to breathe properly, is an absolute necessity. Most pet owners do not know that being able to breathe is ranked as an important pain management strategy. A pet may benefit from receiving oxygen at home, and it may not be as challenging to provide as you might think! Other methods of controlling pain may include oral or injectable medication.

Hunger - If a pet cannot eat properly or willingly, first try hand-feeding. If this is not successful, then it may be appropriate to consider a feeding tube, particularly if oral medication must be given. Blended or liquid diets may offer another alternative.

Hydration - Fluid under the skin is an easy and well-tolerated way to supplement what an ailing pet is drinking. This is not a “heroic” measure and can really help an older pet feel better.

Hygiene - Can your pet be brushed, combed, and kept clean? Is the coat matted? Can the pet move away from stool or urine if it has an accident? Is there a tumor that has outgrown its blood supply and now has an odor or discharge? It is important to turn bedridden pets regularly, keep them clean and dry, and ensure that they have adequate padding underneath to prevent bedsores.

Happiness - Is your pet experiencing joy or mental stimulation? Dogs communicate with their eyes as well as by wagging their tails. Is the ailing pet still interacting with family members and with the environment? Placing comfortable beds near family activities helps a pet remain engaged in life. Dogs are social animals and can become depressed when they are separated from their “pack.”

Mobility - If your pet can no longer move around on its own, it may be time to consider one of the many mobility devices that are available. A sling or harness for support may be all that is required. Other options, depending on how much support is needed, include two-wheeled carts, four-wheel carts, and wagons. Mobility devices allow pets to stay active.

More Good Days Than Bad - When there are too many bad days in a row, or if your pet seems to be “turned off” to life, quality of life is compromised. Bad days may mean nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, frustration, unremitting pain/discomfort, or inability to breathe.

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Flickr