

## EUTHANASIA

Nothing really prepares us for the death of our pet. Whether death is swift and unexpected (like an accident) or whether it comes at the end of a slow decline, we are never fully aware of what a pet has contributed to our lives until our companion is gone.

A pet's life can end under different circumstances:

- We may decide not to pursue medical or surgical treatment in an aging pet.
- A pet's ailment has no cure and the best we can do is alleviate some of its suffering so that it can live the remainder of its days in relative comfort.
- An illness or accident may take our pet suddenly.
- We might decide to euthanase our pet to end its suffering.

We all secretly hope that our pet will have a pain free death - ideally we would like our pet 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 owners, we decide to have the pet euthanased.

Euthanasia is the induction of a 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'. In veterinary practice, it is accomplished by an intravenous injection of a concentrated dose of anesthetic.

The decision to end a life is never easy. It is a personal, loving decision to euthanase a pet whose quality of life has deteriorated to an unacceptable level. It takes courage to assume this last duty and it is our last responsibility to a pet who has given us unconditional love and companionship. The bond between pet and owner is unique. It is easy to become emotionally overwhelmed in keeping your pet alive when you know that there is no hope of them regaining their health.

Vets don't exercise this option lightly. Their medical training and professional lives are dedicated to the diagnosis and treatment of disease in animals. Vets 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 for our pet is probably the most difficult decision a pet owner can make. We might experience all the grief feelings and reactions impacting together with intense mood swings. We may resent our position of power or feel angry at our pet for forcing us to make the decision. We might postpone the decision, bargaining with ourselves that if we wait another day, the decision will not be necessary. Feelings of guilt, dread and anxiety abound as we wrestle with the decision.

**The fundamental guideline is to do what is best for your pet, even if you suffer in doing this.**

To help you to prepare for the decision to euthanase your pet, consider the following questions. Use them as a guide. Only you can decide what is the best solution for you and your pet. Take your time and make an informed decision. Speak at length with your Vet who will go through your pet's condition, prognosis and treatment options.

### Consider the following:

- What is the present quality of my pet's life?
- Does my pet have a malignancy, terminal condition or serious injury?
- Is my pet still eating and drinking well? Active and playful? Affectionate toward me?
- Is my pet able to go to the toilet unaided or is it incontinent?
- Is my pet neglecting itself (e.g. grooming)?
- Is my pet not able to get comfortable - can I do anything to make my pet more comfortable?
- Is my pet interested in the activity surrounding it or is it unwilling to move about?
- Does my pet seem tired, withdrawn and lethargic most of the time?
- Is my pet in pain (do they cry out if touched)? Some don't show that they're in pain.
- Is my pet able to hold its head up when at rest?
- Are any other treatment options available for its condition?
- If a behavioural problem has led me to this decision, have I explored all options for dealing with this, seeking advice and intervention from an animal behaviour expert?
- Does my pet sense that I am withdrawing from it because of its condition?
- 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 be present?
- 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 or family member to be present?
- Do I want any special burial arrangements made?
- Can my Vet store the body so that I can delay burial arrangements until a little later?
- Do I want to adopt another pet?
- Do I need time to recover from this loss before even considering another pet?

**In making the decision, it is important to remember that the welfare of the animal is the prime consideration.**

Having seen our pet when they are happy and healthy, most of us recognise the signs given by a pet who is miserable.

Discuss your pet's welfare with your Vet who will be able to advise whether the pet has a treatable ailment or is approaching the end of its life and help you to make the right decision for your pet and you.

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. They may be in visible distress or withdrawn.

Sometimes it is possible to delay euthanasia for a day without causing suffering (e.g. where the pet has a terminal illness or is extremely old) and the euthanasia is planned. You might want to give your pet a last night of pampering, their favourite foods or food which was normally forbidden. This is a time for you and others who love your pet, to say "goodbye" and reassure your furry friend that they are very much loved. However, if your pet is suffering, or is already under anesthetic, they will not enjoy having their misery prolonged.

### **How Quickly Does it Happen?**

Your animal will not know what is going to happen. They 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 a few seconds to induce a total loss of consciousness. Soon after, the animals breathing stops and their heart stops beating.

If you are holding your pet, you will feel them exhale, relax and become heavier in your arms. Urine may trickle from their 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 only deeply unconscious, they will give a second injection. Your pet will not be aware of this second injection if it is needed.

Your Vet will place the pet into a natural looking sleeping position as if it has fallen asleep and close their eyes if necessary. Because all the muscles of the face have relaxed, the 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 didn't expect it.

### **Should I Stay To The End?**

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

Most Vets will allow you to remain with your pet during euthanasia if you wish. If they don't want you present, it is because you are so distressed and will upset your pet thus making it harder to handle and impossible for your Vet to perform the euthanasia - which is traumatic for all concerned. Your Vet understands that this is a difficult time for you. 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, they will call you back in afterwards. Your Vet will treat your pet with as much respect and dignity whether or not you are present.

Use something dignified to put your pet's body in – a pet bag, towel or blanket. Your Vet will normally wrap or cover your pet's body, or otherwise, place it in a black or blue bag. This is not a sign of disrespect, it is for hygiene and your own privacy. Some 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.

Remember there is no shame in showing your emotions at this sad time – it is a natural reaction. Your Vet and assistant won't think any less of you if you lose control. They understand and probably feel the same for their own pets.

### **Can I Have My Pet Euthanased At Home?**

If you are willing to pay a call out fee, your Vet may euthanase your pet in your own home. You and your pet may find this less traumatic than waiting at the Vet's surgery. Ensure your pet is contained when the Vet arrives. In the case of a home visit where a veterinary nurse is not available, and the Vet doesn't feel that you are able to restrain the pet, they may sedate the pet first and then administer the final injection. This is less distressing for all concerned than trying to restrain an agitated pet. Don't be surprised if your Vet leaves soon afterwards, as they don't want to intrude upon your grief and 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 also become upset. However, they don't know why you are upset and don't 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, you may be so distraught and have difficulty in deciding how to dispose of your pet's body. Where possible, discuss this while the pet is alive and reach a shared family decision that you won't regret later. Your Vet will explain the options available to you, which fall in to four main categories: burial at home, burial in a pet cemetery, individual cremation (where the ashes are returned to you in a casket), and communal cremation.

### **Do Pets Grieve?**

Animals can form very firm attachments with each other. Even pets that outwardly appear not to get along will exhibit intense stress reactions when separated.

Grieving pets exhibit many symptoms identical to those experienced by their owner. The surviving pet(s) may become restless, anxious, depressed, lethargic, experience loss of appetite and disturbed sleep as well as do a lot of 'sighing'. Often, grieving pets will search for their dead companions and crave more attention from their owners.

### **How Can I Help My Grieving Pet?**

- There is no evidence that letting the surviving animals see and smell their dead companion will help them, but some people claim that it does. Usually, all it accomplishes is to make the owner feel better. Therefore, if the owner wants to have the surviving pets "say good-bye," then it's OK.
- Keep the surviving pets routines as normal as possible.
- Try not to unintentionally reinforce the behavior changes. If the pet's appetite is picky, don't keep changing the food as all that does is create a fussy pet. Don't overdo the attention given to pets as it can lead to separation anxiety.
- Allow the surviving animals to work out the new dominance hierarchy themselves. There may be scuffles and fights as they work out the new pecking or pack order. This is normal and will be mostly displayed by dogs.
- Don't get a new pet to help the grieving pet unless you are ready. It may backfire if you're not emotionally ready for a new pet. Often owners who are still grieving intensely won't have the energy or motivation for a new pet.
- Some people welcome a younger pet into their home as the end of their elderly pet's life is approaching. Especially with dogs, this can give the old pet a new lease of life and when their end finally comes, help mitigate the sense of loss felt by the owner and other pets.

### **After the Decision**

Each of us mourns differently, some more privately than others, and others 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.

## **HEAVEN'S DOGGY-DOOR**

My best friend closed his eyes last night,  
As his head was in my hand  
The Doctors said he was in pain,  
And it was hard for him to stand  
The thoughts that scurried through my head,  
As I cradled him in my arms.  
Were of his younger, puppy years,  
And OH...his many charms.

Today, there was no gentle nudge  
With an intense "I love you gaze",  
Only a heart that's filled with tears  
Remembering our joy filled days.  
But an Angel just appeared to me,  
And he said, "You should cry no more,  
GOD also loves our canine friends,  
HE's installed a 'doggy-door"!

## **THE RAINBOW BRIDGE**

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who have been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind. They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent; his eager body begins to quiver. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster. You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together ...

## **A MESSAGE FROM YOUR PET**

If it should be that I grow weak  
Take me to where my needs they'll tend  
And pain should keep me from my sleep  
And please stay with me to the end  
Then you must do what must be done  
Hold me firm and speak to me  
For this last battle can't be won.  
Until my eyes no longer see

You will be sad – I understand  
I know in time that you will see  
Don't let your grief then stay your hand  
The kindness that you did for me  
For this day more than all the rest  
Although my tail its last has waved  
You love for me must stand the test  
From pain and suffering I've been saved

We've had so many happy years  
Please do not grieve, it must be you  
What is to come can hold no fears  
Who has this painful thing to do,  
You'd not want me to suffer so  
We've been so close we 2 these years  
The time has come, please let me go  
Don't let your heart hold back its tears