



The Pet Oncologist

## **Euthanasia. When it is time to say goodbye**



**The decision to euthanise a beloved pet is not easy. Concerns about your pet's quality of life and dignity are important. Therefore, it is important that you work with your veterinary health care team to ensure they understand your concerns and that your wishes are honoured. You must be given complete and accurate information to make an informed decision. Although your veterinarian may recommend humane euthanasia, you need to know that the decision to say goodbye is personal and that you are the ultimate decision-maker.**

### ***What is euthanasia?***

Euthanasia is the medical procedure of alleviating pain and suffering by administering intravenous drugs that stop the heart and breathing permanently, allowing for a painless death.

This usually involves injecting a highly concentrated anaesthetic agent into a catheter placed in the vein until unconsciousness occurs, and the heart and breathing stop forever. The medicines used will transition pets from relaxation, sleep, to death within seconds to minutes. As pets pass away, he or she may take a deep breath or slight movement before completely relaxing. Pets can lose bowel and urine control, and both eyes usually remain open. Although it can be an upsetting experience, you should take comfort in knowing that your pet will no longer be suffering and in pain.

Euthanasia is performed a bit differently by each veterinary health care team, so it is important that you ask them to explain the process to you.

### ***When will I know it is time to say goodbye?***

This is a personal decision. There is no correct decision, but there will be a decision that is right for you.

Things to consider include:

- Your pet's ***quality of life***
- The ***cost*** of continuing care
- The ***time*** you need to invest in the care of your pet
- Your ***desires*** for the kind of life you want for your pet to live

You can assess the quality of life by assessing your pet's appetite, activity and energy levels, and daily rituals.

Some questions to consider include:

- 1) Do the good times outnumber the bad?
- 2) Can my pet still do things that made him or her happy?
- 3) How different is my pet now compared to before he or she was sick?

If your pet starts to have more bad days than good days, then it might be time to say goodbye.

Some owners find it helpful to keep a simple daily diary of the good and bad days. For example, for each day, you can mark how your pet's day was with a happy or sad face. Look over the diary every week, and if your pet starts to have more bad days than good days, then it might be time to say goodbye.

You can also keep a list of ten things that your pet enjoys, such as eating, walking, playing with a stick, back scratches and basking in the sun. If your pet is not ticking half of the items on the list, it might be time to say goodbye.

Sometimes, it takes just one event for you to know it is time to say goodbye, such as your pet no longer eats.

Although most owners do not like to think about euthanasia, it is helpful to think about it in advance, so you are not faced with a rushed decision, for example, when your pet is all of a sudden unwell.

***Before euthanasia, you may want to consider the following:***

- Try not overly worry or overreact to how your pet is doing every day. Enjoy the time you have now as you never know when you need to say goodbye.
- Spend time with your pet doing activities and rituals that have meaning to you and your pet. This may be something as simple as allowing your pet to sit on your lap as you watch TV or allowing your pet to bask in the sun in a favourite place.
- It is essential children are not sheltered from this important decision-making process and time. Many studies have shown that excluding children or making up stories such as the pet ran away can cause psychological damage to children in the long run.
- You may wish to take photos, clip hair, make paw imprints (on paper or castings) as a lasting memorial.
- You may find it easier to discuss body care (such as cremation, burial, disposal, etc.) before euthanasia.

***Should I be present at the time of euthanasia?***

The decision to be present at the time of euthanasia is a personal decision that only you can make. Some pet owners wish to be present at the time of euthanasia, whereas others do not. You can change your decision about whether you wish to be present at any time.

Even if you do not wish to be present, it is important to understand how euthanasia is going to be performed. Each hospital performs euthanasia differently, so it is important you discuss this with your veterinary health care team.

***What if I do not want to euthanise my pet?***

It is important to discuss this with your veterinarian.

At-home hospice care can sometimes be considered and is focused on alleviating pain and suffering and making terminally ill patients as comfortable as possible. At-home hospice care can also be an upsetting experience, so it is essential that your veterinarian understands your wishes and helps you with keeping your pet as comfortable as possible until he or she passes away naturally.

### ***Do pets grieve, and what should I do?***

Families that live together form close attachments. When a companion animal dies, surviving pets may cling to their human family members, be more reactive to stimuli, appear anxious or depressed, and demonstrate a loss of interest in playing, sleeping or eating. These behavioural and emotional changes are often temporary and usually due to a distress response from owners or a distress response to changes in their usual routine as a result of the death.

If you think your pet is grieving or showing signs of separating anxiety, you can try pheromones which may help reduce your pet's anxiety (e.g. DAP for dogs and Feliway spray for cats) or try to keep your routine as close what it was like before the death. It is also important to discuss your concerns with your veterinarian in case there is an underlying medical problem. If an underlying medical problem is ruled out, it might be a good idea to consult with a specialist behaviourist.

### ***I think I waited too long to say goodbye, or I think I said goodbye too soon.***

It is common as part of the grieving process for owners to second guess their decision. I sometimes get owners contacting me saying they think they waited too long to say goodbye, or they think they euthanise their pet too soon. I understand this is a challenging time and decision. However, I think you should take comfort in knowing that you have alleviated suffering and pain to your pet and that many owners also feel the same. I think most owners know their pets best and get it right with when it is time to say goodbye.

**I hope this information helps pet owners understand more about euthanasia. If you have any questions or concerns about euthanasia, please contact your veterinary health care team.**