



END OF LIFE CARE

As dog owners we have a connection with our pet, an understanding that doesn't require words, and as our pet gets older we often find ourselves faced with difficult decisions. Whether our furry friend is approaching his golden years or has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, we inevitably find ourselves asking the question "What should I do?"

As our pet's health declines, it's important we do whatever we can to ensure they feel secure, like surrounding them with their favorite things, like a warm blanket or special squeaky toy. It's also essential to provide a warm sleeping spot with plenty of cushioning, as pressure sores can develop in pets with limited mobility.

Sadly, our duty to our beloved pet doesn't end there. This question often leads to one of the hardest decisions we are going to have to make, and as most of our pets don't live as long as we do, it's inevitable. Coping with the impending loss of a pet is one of the most difficult experiences a pet parent will face. But how do we know when it's time to let go?

Quality of Life

Assessing the quality of your pet's life can be difficult, but recognizing when its declining is an important part of ensuring your loved one is comfortable in their final days.

Here are some of the things to look out for to understand whether your pet's quality of life is declining:

Pain. When cats and dogs are suffering, they may not show outward signs that we normally associate with pain like whimpering or crying. Sometimes an animal will continue to eat or drink in spite of pain, panting or disorientation. The most important thing you can do for your elderly pet is to minimize any pain or distress they're experiencing at the end of their life. Some physiological and behavioral signs that your pet might be experiencing pain include:

- excessive panting or gasping for breath
- reclusiveness
- reluctance to move
- food pickiness

If you're unsure of how much your pet is suffering, keep a daily record of good days and bad days. Be sure to consult with your veterinarian and treat any health problems, since undiagnosed issues can cause discomfort and rapid deterioration. Your veterinarian will explain the pain management protocol associated with your pet's specific condition.



For pain due to arthritis, for example, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug may be prescribed, but only after blood tests ensure that confirm your pet does not have kidney or liver problems that would preclude using this type of medication. If your pet has more severe pain, due to a chronic illness like cancer, your veterinarian may prescribe a narcotic pain killer in the form of an oral medicine or a patch that is placed on the skin.

Irregular behaviors. Irregular behavior patterns are often the first sign that your pet is ill or in pain. A pet may lose their normal activity levels, appetite and grooming tendencies, or they may exhibit inappropriate elimination, vocalization and aggression.

Other healthy pets in the household may experience similar abnormal behaviors as a reaction to the changes and distress of your sick animal companion. Be sure to get regular check-ups for all of your pets to monitor and protect against any undiagnosed issues.

Incontinence. Some older pets may develop incontinence, or the loss of bladder control, so be sure to check your furry friend regularly for any wetness or soiling. If your pet needs help getting up to urinate or defecate, you can purchase a sling or use a large towel to wrap under their body and assist them.

Understanding your Options

Your veterinarian will be in a good position to advise you during these difficult times as they have had the time to get to know you and your pet. If you haven't had a solid, trusting relationship with your vet over the life of your pet, it's worth either developing it or finding another vet who you can better relate to.

Some factors to consider:

- **How many people are affected by the illness and possible death of the pet?** If it is just you and your pet, then the decision might be easier. But if there are other family members involved in the pet's life, then their feelings and wishes need to be considered.
- **How much money are you prepared to spend?** Most of us hate having to look at this. We feel we would do anything humanly possible to save our animals' lives. But unless you have an insurance plan, many treatment options or specialists today can be very expensive. If you choose an expensive treatment, will your vet allow you to pay over time? Are you prepared to forgo that vacation you had planned, or the purchase of that giant screen TV?
- **If extensive nursing care is needed, do you have the time?** Of course you want to have the time for someone who has been so important to you and your family. But you need to be realistic. Is everyone out at work or school all day with long commutes back and forth? With diabetes, for example, the pet may need an insulin shot twice a day, 12 hours apart. Can you fit that into your schedule?
- **What kind of place do you live in?** For a pet who has rear-end paralysis, special carts with wheels are available to support their back legs, while they propel forward with their front legs. These work great on hard surfaces like concrete or a firm lawn. They do not work well in sand, loose soil, or very rocky areas. You may have to decide if a cart is an option in your area.

Deciding what's best

On whatever road your decision takes you, know that you are not alone. As pet owners we have all had to make decisions that we don't want to for the benefit of our loved ones.

If you have children it's important that you talk to them about what is happening at every stage. If the pet is sick, then explaining in simple but direct language what is wrong can help remove the mystery from a child's mind. This gives you the opportunity to show that animal bodies don't live forever. Then, when the sickness progresses to the point where your pet needs to be euthanized to prevent further suffering, the child will understand it more easily.

When it's time, and where applicable, allow all of the family members an opportunity to say goodbye to the pet. Some veterinarians will even come to your home to perform the euthanasia. This is an individual decision and may not be appropriate in all situations. The term "euthanasia" means "gentle death," and when done by a caring professional, can be very releasing for a family after having experienced a painful illness.

My Pet Is Elderly and Will Soon Pass Away. How Can I Make My Home More Comfortable?

The most important thing you can do for your elderly pet is to minimize any pain or distress they're experiencing at the end of their life. First, be sure to consult with your veterinarian and treat any health problems, since undiagnosed issues can cause discomfort and rapid deterioration.



Make your pet feel secure by surrounding them with their favorite things, like a warm blanket or special squeaky toy. Since pressure sores can develop in pets with limited mobility, it's also essential to provide a warm sleeping spot with plenty of cushioning.

Some older pets may develop incontinence, or the loss of bladder control, so be sure to check your furry friend regularly for any wetness or soiling. If your pet needs help getting up to urinate or defecate, you can purchase a sling or use a large towel to wrap under her body and assist her.

A guide to caring for your pet during their final days

Coping with the impending loss of a pet is one of the most difficult experiences a pet parent will face. Whether your furry friend is approaching their golden years or has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, it's important to calmly guide the end-of-life experience and minimize any discomfort or distress. As your pet's health declines, you may elect to care for your pet at home—with the supervision of a veterinarian—or you may decide to end their suffering with euthanasia.

What Determines a Good Quality of Life for My Pet?

- Does your pet seem irritable, restless or confused?
- Has he lost his appetite or does he drink water excessively?
- Does she avoid her favorite activities?
- Is your pet picked on by other animals in the home? This can happen when a sick or elderly dog becomes the weakest member of the "pack."
- Does your pet seek out unusual places to sleep or hide?

When your pet's quality of life deteriorates due to an untreatable disease or aging, please speak with your veterinarian and family members about end-of-life issues.

What Is Pet Hospice Care and What Are Its Benefits? What Are the Goals of Pet Hospice Care?



Hospice care—also called palliative care—is an option for pet parents who want to engage in an extended good-bye or are opposed to euthanasia. Pet hospice is an option if your pet is suffering from a terminal illness and a cure is not possible. The focus is to make a pet's final days or weeks more pleasant with the proper use of pain medications, dietary strategies and human interaction. Pet hospice is not a place, but a personal choice and philosophy based on the principle that death is a part of life and can be dignified. The goal of pet hospice is not to cure your pet's illness but rather to ensure a peaceful end-of-life experience.

A participating veterinarian will teach pet parents how to provide intensive home care to keep an ill pet as comfortable as possible. Every pet parent should also have a back-up plan, which may include euthanasia, in case the animal's suffering gets out of control.

Is Hospice Care the Right Course for My Pet?

Although hospice care is a growing area of veterinary medicine, we need to be very careful not to prolong the suffering of pets who are in pain or experiencing poor quality of life. It is very difficult to face losing a pet, but our choices must not be clouded by fear of the grief we will experience.

If you are considering hospice care, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I have a local veterinarian whose expertise includes the most advanced techniques in pain management, alternative treatments, oxygen and hydration?
- Do I have a veterinarian available 24 hours a day to provide emergency euthanasia if my pet's suffering gets out of control, such as the sudden onset of seizures?
- Do I have adequate resources to provide constant care for my pet, even when I am out of the house?
- Will hospice home care for my pet seriously disrupt my regular family and work obligations?

What Role Do I Play in My Pet's Hospice Care?

Hospice care requires an active commitment from pet parents, who work with their veterinary team to make sure their pet's life ends comfortably. Your pet will require your constant supervision—from assessing his condition to pain management or, if necessary, making the final decision to opt for euthanasia.

If you decide pet hospice care is the right course for you and your pet, you will become your pet's primary nurse and caregiver, as well as the link between your pet and the veterinary team.

How Is Pet Hospice Different from Human Hospice Care?

Human hospice care is available to people who have accepted the fact that they are terminally ill and want to stop further medical treatment aimed at a cure. Hospice care allows a person to be relieved of pain in a more comfortable and less expensive setting than a hospital.

Human patients and their families who opt for hospice care have a more developed support system than pet parents. When a pet parent chooses hospice care but cannot care for his pet at home, there are few places that will board and nurse the animal. It may also be more difficult to find a local veterinarian who is an expert in pet hospice care.

How Can I Find a Veterinarian Who Practices Hospice Care?

First consult with your primary veterinarian and see if they recommend hospice care for your pet based on their specific needs. Your vet may already practice some form of hospice care or may refer you to another vet who will guide you through a hospice program.

What Do I Need to Know in Order to Provide Home Hospice Care for My Terminally Ill Pet?



Pet parents who opt for home hospice care will be taught how to administer pain medication, change bandages, provide fluid therapy and perform general nursing duties, including keeping their pets comfortable and clean.

One of the most important tasks as caretaker is to observe and report any changes in your pet's behavior, weight, temperature, eating habits, mobility and overall well-being. If you notice any changes, immediately contact your veterinarian, who will adjust your pet's medication and treatment accordingly. It's also important to remember that euthanasia may still be necessary with hospice care. If a peaceful, natural end is unlikely or your pet is in pain, you may decide to end their suffering with euthanasia.

Will My Pet Show Signs that He Is Ready to Pass Away?

To be as aware as possible of your pet's condition, you should:

- Be able to recognize signs of physical suffering typical of your pet's age and/or illness. Your veterinarian is the best source of this information.
- Prevent unnecessary suffering in your terminally ill, injured or aged animal by finding ways to assess your pet's quality of life. With your vet's help, figure out the signs of a good day compared to a bad day and keep a record of how often the signs of pain appear.
- Be as informed as you can about your pet's behavior. Being unaware or unable to assess signs and symptoms will exhaust family members and put your pet at risk of lingering longer than is comfortable.



What Is Euthanasia?

Euthanasia provides a painless, peaceful end for a pet who would otherwise continue to suffer. Your veterinarian has special training to provide your pet with a humane and gentle death. During the procedure, your vet will inject your pet with a sedative followed by a special medication. The animal experiences no awareness of the end of life—the process is akin to undergoing general anesthesia for a surgical procedure and takes about 10 to 20 seconds.

How Do I Know When Is the Right Time to Euthanize My Pet?

Your veterinarian is really the best person to advise you on when the time is right to euthanize—information from medical tests is often more accurate than what a pet owner can observe, and pet owners often delay the moment of euthanasia in anticipation of grief.

Observing and keeping an accurate record of your pet in their daily activities can help you to decide. If you observe that moments of discomfort outweigh their capacity to enjoy life, it is time to euthanize, even if your pet still experiences pleasure in eating or socializing. If your pet is in pain, your main goal should be to minimize their suffering.

Saying Goodbye



Creating a ritual around the life of your pet can be very healing. If possible, lay your pet to rest in a quiet part of your yard and put up a marker with his or her name on it. This can be as elaborate or as simple as you like. A rock with the pet's name in indelible marker written on it, a piece of wood with the name carved into it, a ring of stones, or a newly planted tree on the site will help family members remember all the good times they had with their pet. If you choose cremation, then you can create a place of honor for the ashes, with pictures and stories contributed by everyone in the family.

Talking about the pet seems to be an important part of getting through the inevitable grieving process. Remembering all the little things that made your pet an important part of your life helps to ease the pain. Animals teach us unconditional love, loyalty, kindness, and a host of other wonderful things. They make us better people. After a period of mourning and remembering the old days, think about adding a new animal to the family. You and your family will see that life goes on and that it is possible to love again.

Will My Other Pets Grieve a Pet Who Has Passed Away?

After the loss of a companion animal, many people observe a change in their surviving pet's behavior. Sometimes the pet appears depressed and shows diminished interest in play or food, and it often helps to simply give your surviving pet some extra attention and love. If your animal companion appears upset, check with a veterinarian to make sure there is no underlying medical problem causing their behavior.

It is also well-documented that pets can recognize death in a companion animal. Cats, dogs and horses who see the deceased body of an animal they knew can adjust very well and spend less time searching and grieving than pets who have not seen their companion's remains.

For more help with how to cope with pet loss, please read our section on All About Pet Loss.