

When to consider euthanasia

- Euthanasia is the painless, humane termination of life.
- The decision regarding when to euthanize is fraught with medical, financial, ethical, religious, moral, and sometimes legal considerations.
- Seeking counsel from family, friends, and others can help with this difficult decision. Ultimately, you must trust yourself to make the best choice for your pet.

What Is Euthanasia?

Euthanasia is the painless, humane termination of life. There are times when medical science has exhausted all of its capabilities and euthanasia is the only way to prevent an animal from suffering needlessly. However, the decision regarding when to euthanize is fraught with medical, financial, ethical, religious, moral, and sometimes legal considerations. Euthanasia is therefore a medical procedure that needs to be discussed (however painful that discussion may be) and considered fully before a final decision is made.

How Is Euthanasia Performed?

Most veterinarians use a concentrated solution of a barbiturate, administered as an injection into a vein, to perform euthanasia on a pet. The medication enters the circulation immediately, and it generally stops heart and brain function very quickly. Most pets fall quietly asleep within a few seconds, followed quickly by termination of heart and brain function. However, some animals may experience an excitement phase as the medication begins to affect their brain. During this time, the pet may vocalize or exhibit other distressing behaviors. The excitement phase is not painful in any way; it is merely a reaction of the pet's brain to the chemicals in the medication. The excitement phase generally lasts for only a few moments, after which the animal becomes calm and falls asleep; heart and brain function soon cease, and the euthanasia procedure is completed.

Your veterinarian may be able to offer you several options based on your preferences for conducting your pet's euthanasia. Some veterinarians offer the option of being present or stepping out of the room as the injection is given. Some veterinarians may recommend placement of an intravenous catheter for administering the injection, and some veterinarians also administer a tranquilizer to calm the pet before the final injection is given. For pets that are too sick to travel, some veterinarians may be able to schedule a house call so that the procedure can be performed at your home. Ask your veterinarian what options he or she offers. Your veterinary team will make every effort to accommodate your wishes at this very difficult time.

When Should I Consider Euthanasia?

The decision regarding when to euthanize is never an easy one – not for you and certainly not for your veterinarian. This is partly because there are very few times when euthanasia is the only option available. For example, if a dog is hit by a car and sustains a broken back and other extensive injuries that cannot be treated, most people would not argue that the dog is suffering and euthanasia is the only reasonable option. However, most situations are not so clear cut. What

about the pet that has been sick for a long time with kidney disease, heart disease, cancer, or another serious illness, and the owners have reached their emotional or financial limits? What about the elderly pet that is progressively having problems walking and seems to be in pain most of the time? What about the elderly pet that has started to urinate and defecate uncontrollably in the house? These are just a few examples of some situations that may lead a caring pet owner to consider euthanasia.

In short, there are very few times when euthanasia is the only option for a pet. It can therefore be very difficult to know with certainty when it is absolutely time to terminate your pet's life. Here are a few points to think about when struggling to come to a decision:

- Is my pet suffering?
- If my pet is suffering, what can be done about it?
- Are there any treatments that may help my pet?
- Will diagnostic tests provide useful information that can help me decide?
- Should I seek a second (or third) opinion?
- What are my limitations (e.g., financial and moral/ethical) in terms of diagnostic and treatment options?
- Does my pet enjoy his or her life right now?
- If I do this right now, am I doing it for myself or for my pet?
- If I *don't* do this right now, am I doing it for myself or for my pet?
- When I look back on this decision, will I think that I gave up too soon? Will I think that I let things go too far?
- If I'm not ready right now, is there anything that can be done temporarily to help my pet while I struggle to come to a decision?

Although euthanasia is a very personal and private decision, you may not have to make this difficult choice on your own. Your veterinarian may be able to recommend alternative treatments or diagnostic options that can help your pet. In some cases, family members, friends, or clergy can also offer counsel. If finances are a key concern, family members may be willing to help finance further treatment if euthanasia is the only other option. Some veterinarians can also offer you payment arrangements if finances are an issue.

The decision to euthanize is literally a life-or-death choice that should not be made in haste or without careful thought. Consulting friends, family, and others for support can be very helpful. Ultimately, as a loving pet owner, you must trust yourself to make the best decision for your pet.