

A gentle death – facing pet euthanasia

All living creatures have a limited time on earth. For some, their lifespan lasts a day, for others 80-90 years. When we share our life with a companion animal, we face the sad fact that we are likely to outlive them.

Ideally, we hope that when our beloved friend dies, it is at home, takes place peacefully during sleep, snuggled up in a favourite bed and is the consequence of advancing years after enjoying a long and happy life. Unfortunately, this is seldom the case. Accident and illness usually force us to consider euthanasia in order to prevent further distress. As pet owners (and I dislike this term but in law we are responsible for the welfare of our animals) it falls to us to make that extremely difficult decision of when to end their life when all avenues of treatment have been exhausted and our pet is suffering.

If an animal is displaying signs of distress, be it through an accident, illness or old age, euthanasia must be seriously considered. Often referred as being 'put to sleep', by the Greek definition it simply means 'good and gentle death.' And as devoted friends, we could ask for no less for those that we love. To relieve suffering which cannot be alleviated by any other means. In a peaceful and quiet manner. A decision purely motivated by love. The final act of love. Our needs become secondary in importance. Sometimes, the desire to keep our much loved pet with us because we cannot face life without it will feel overwhelming but as we know, our pet's welfare always comes first. If we can accept this, then we take comfort in the knowledge that we acted in our pet's best interest regardless of our personal anguish.

Animals may display signs of illness by withdrawing from the world and becoming depressed, hunching up, being still and lethargic, crying and whimpering, losing their appetite and weight, falling over, experiencing problems with their bowel and bladder, have difficulties in breathing and vomiting. Quality of life is minimal and dignity is lost.

Taking care of a pet that is coming to the end of its life, can be a lonely, sad and frightening experience, especially as our pet cannot tell us how they are feeling. We hold the ultimate responsibility for our pet's welfare and carry the burden of hopefully making the right decisions at the right time. We often rely upon our unique relationship to guide us in making sure our pet is as comfortable as possible. And as most of us know, our pets can be a real handful when they are ill! Spitting out tablets, refusing to go into a carrier or resolutely sitting outside the vet's surgery with the 'I'm not going in there' face. We may spend much more time on cleaning (especially if the animal has become incontinent or is vomiting) and

finding tasty tempting food for lost appetites. We can become exhausted through nursing a poorly pet during the night. Trying to get time off work to attend vets appointments, worry about what the vet will say and concern over treatment bills adds more and more stress. Even ringing the vet over routine matters can make people feel very anxious.

Talking to the vet should enable us to accept that no further medical procedures or treatment will help our pet. Vets will advise when euthanasia is the kindest option. Most are excellent at breaking this bad news and know when the time is right. A veterinary surgeon can only give advice; it will be our final decision. And trust and confidence in the vet's competence and their compassion can be crucial in preventing long term self-condemnation and anger at the veterinary surgeon. If you do have genuine doubts regarding your veterinary surgeon's advice, don't be frightened to get a second opinion.

Arriving at this heart-breaking decision is often one of the most important and painful decisions we shall ever make. We may be full of doubt, despair, anxiety, racked with guilt and terrified of making an awful mistake even when it is obvious that it is the only option available. Have I left it too late or been too hasty? These questions often go round and round in our minds. An urgent decision may be necessary if the pet is involved in an accident or unexpected test results show a rapidly advancing terminal illness or disease. Alternatively, we may have been aware for a long time that an elderly pet is failing or a known condition is getting progressively worse. Sometimes we just know that our pet is ill.

We may have had previous experience of caring for pets that are reaching the end of their lives and have an idea of the signs to look for. But as each pet is different, this may help or hinder us. Talking things over with family members can help. Hopefully, all the family will agree with each other otherwise arguing over the decision will only add extra stress. Often, people say it is the pet itself that lets them know when 'enough is enough – I can't go on'. We are guided by that bond.

Having made the decision to put our pet to sleep, further decisions are necessary. Whether to be present or not at the death and should death take place at home or at the veterinary surgery. Choosing a death at home or the surgery can sometimes be overtaken by events. Rushing a pet to the vets following an accident or sudden illness can sometimes mean that euthanasia takes place there and then.

Many people want to be present during euthanasia. To hold, support and comfort their friend during the final moments of life. Others find it too sad to be present, though some may return to stroke and hold their pet after death. Again, a very personal and distressing choice.

Many animal lovers opt for a planned home visit and the majority of veterinary surgeons provide this service. Benefits to the pet include being spared the upheaval of travelling to the surgery when they feel poorly and especially for those pets that dislike going to the vets.

Personally, I feel a death at home is far less disruptive to the pet and they feel more relaxed in their own home and surroundings. As caring companions, we want to keep our pet as comfortable as possible. Also, we are spared travelling at a time of tremendous anxiety and distress.

The actual process of euthanasia is normally quick, painless and straightforward. If a pet is very nervous by being handled, a sedative can be given first. The vet will normally shave off a small piece of fur on the leg in order to give an injection of strong barbiturates (though occasionally another site will be used). Barbiturates induce sleep and relaxation and death is almost immediate. Sometimes an older animal can take a little longer before the injection takes effect. Some pets will be given anaesthetic gas so that they are already asleep before the injection. This is often for small furries such as hamsters etc. For horses, the vet will use a lethal injection or gun. Euthanasia by gun can only be carried out by someone licenced to use a firearm and must be an experienced professional person.

The vet will check to ensure the heart has stopped. After death, a pet may empty its bowels or bladder due to the muscles relaxing. Twitching muscles and little gasps of air are also normal. Often the eyes remain open. All these functions are perfectly natural and common after death but are not signs of life. However they can be very frightening and upsetting for people if they are not warned of this beforehand.

This will be the time for your private goodbyes and cuddles. *And this is your time so take all the time that you need.*

If the death has taken place at home, the veterinary surgeon may leave your pet with you if you have opted for a home burial or return with it to the veterinary practice and organise burial at a pet cemetery or arrange cremation.

So many decisions at such a difficult time. Making the right decision for your pet will be crucial to their welfare. It will enable you still to grieve but with the knowledge that you acted in the best interest of your cherished pet. You gave your beautiful friend a compassionate and gentle death.

Animal bereavement support factsheets are a free resource to help bereaved animal lovers. They must not be interpreted as providing professional counselling or medical advice and no liability or responsibility can be accepted as such. Please consult your G.P for qualified assistance. Thank you.

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