Euthanasia in Pets: A Difficult Decision

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UNDERSTANDING euthanasia

Chances are, you will outlive your pet and as a result, will need to make one of the toughest decisions you'll have to make in your life – to put him "to sleep." Although you may naturally want to avoid it, as your pet's caretaker you must make the kindest decision, one that will bring the least suffering to your pet. Trust your instincts and enlist the advice of other people in your pet's life such as your veterinarian or her staff, your friends, and your family. Knowing what to expect may make the process less difficult.

First, you will go to your veterinarian's clinic to sign consent papers. Clinic staff will ask what you wish done with your pet's remains: to take your pet home with you for burial or to have him or her cremated. If you choose cremation, you may have the ashes returned to you. In some areas, pet cemeteries and memorial services are available. Talk to your veterinarian ahead of time about the options available to you.

Your veterinarian or her staff will show you to a private room for you and your pet. Your veterinarian may take your pet into another room to insert a catheter (a temporary fixed needle) into a vein in your pet's leg, to make the final injection go more smoothly. Sometimes a drug will be given to place your pet in a state of relaxation. At this point you will have some time to be with your pet and say your goodbyes. It is up to you whether or not you wish to be with your pet during the actual euthanasia. If you feel unable to stay for this stage of the procedure, there is no reason to feel guilty. Your veterinarian will take care of your pet with compassion and dignity.

QUALITY OF LIFE making the decision

It is always difficult to accept that age or illness have compromised a pet's quality of life to such an extent that it's time to let them go. When the difficult decision to let your pet go must be made, the following guidelines may be helpful for assessing a pet's overall quality of life:

- the amount of suffering and pain
- the ability to eat and drink
- the capability to keep clean
- interest in interacting with family members
- the strength and flexibility to be somewhat mobile
- the ratio of "good days" to "bad days"

Your veterinarian will inject a concentrated solution of pentobarbital into the vein.

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You will see your pet relax, and soon your pet will be deeply asleep, similar to an anesthetized human patient in the hospital. In the case of euthanasia, enough extra pentobarbital is used so that after the pet goes to sleep, the heart stops. In cases where animals are quite old or very ill, this often happens very quickly. In other cases this may take several minutes, especially if the pet has poor circulation.

At this point, you may see your pet twitch or seem to take a deep breath. Remember that once your pet relaxes, he is asleep and not aware of anything else. The muscles of the urinary bladder and the anus may relax, releasing urine and stool.

Finally, a stethoscope will be used by your veterinarian to confirm that your pet's heart has stopped beating. If you wish, the veterinary staff will allow you further time to be alone with your pet. People show emotion in different ways, so don't feel embarrassed if you shed tears, or guilty if you don't. Although this is always a difficult time, try to take comfort in remembering the happy times you and your pet have had together.

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