

MAKING THE DECISION TO EUTHANIZE

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www.peteducation.com/human_animal_bond/euthansia.htm with additions by
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For owners and veterinarians, euthanizing a pet is one of the most difficult things we will ever do. [It is not just considering the end of the life of your pet, but the changing of the relationship or bond you had with that pet. It is not the end to the relationship, because that will go on forever in your heart and your memory, but the relationship will change dramatically because your pet will not be physically present anymore.] Euthanasia continues to be an option for many pet owners who do not want their terminally ill pet to suffer, or who may find the veterinary costs for continued treatment of their pet to be prohibitive. As an owner, the emotions you feel at this time may make it hard to think, communicate and make decisions. Therefore, it is often helpful to discuss the process of euthanasia with your veterinarian well in advance of its occurrence. Which family members will be present during the procedure, when and where it will take place, options for handling the pet's remains, how the family member may want to say good-bye or provide a memorial for their pet, and how and with whom they will spend time immediately after the euthanasia are all important issues which should be discussed.

HOW WILL I KNOW WHEN IT IS TIME?

Knowing when euthanasia should be considered depends on your pet's health as well as your own. It is often helpful to look at quality of life your pet is experiencing. Consider the following questions (questions written by Dr. Brown):

- Does your pet move comfortably?
- Does your pet still enjoy eating?
- Is your pet able to comfortably relieve his or herself?
- Can your pet respond to you normally, or does he or she seem tired or withdrawn?
- Is your pet still enjoying and interacting with the surroundings?
- Can your pet still take part in favorite activities?
- Is there more pain than pleasure in your pet's life?

You will be able to make a much better decision, and be more comfortable in your decision if you get as much information as possible regarding your pet's condition. If your pet is sick, ask about the treatment options, possible outcomes and chances of recovery. In most instances you will not need to make the decision immediately, so take time to think about what you should do. Discuss the decision with all of the other family members, including any children. Although it is a human tendency to question our decisions afterward, if you know you made informed decisions it will reduce the "what ifs" you may tend to ask yourself. Decide what you want your pet's death to be like. As hard as it is, you need to consider the financial cost as well as the emotional

cost of continuing to care for your pet. Do not feel guilty if you cannot afford expensive treatment: there are many people who cannot. It does not make you a "bad" owner or one who loves their pet any less.

You need to consider what is best for your pet, but also what is best for you and your family. Are you physically able to manage your pet's care? Do you feel ready to say goodbye or do you need some more time? What will make it possible for you to feel comfortable regarding the decision?

WHAT HAPPENS DURING EUTHANASIA?

Euthanasia is a peaceful and virtually pain-free process, but it is best to understand what will occur and how your pet's body may react. Knowing these things may help you make your decision regarding euthanasia, and make the process less traumatic for you.

Euthanasia of exotic pets is a little different than in dogs or cats. In dogs and cats, a catheter is usually placed in a vein in a conscious animal and the euthanasia solution is administered in that manner. In our small exotic pets, we cannot place catheters unless the patient is heavily sedated and in very ill or very small animals, it can be difficult to even place the catheter at all. For that reason, the pet is usually heavily sedated first with a small injection in the muscle or with inhalant anesthesia. Once the pet is completely anesthetized and can feel no pain, the euthanasia solution is administered via another injection. As mentioned, because many of these pets are very ill or very small it is not possible to inject the solution into a vein. In those cases, it is necessary to give the injection directly into the heart. This may sound distressing, but remember that the pet is heavily sedated and feels no pain and is not aware of the injection. In reptiles where the heart may be difficult to reach, as through a shell, the final injection may be given into the abdominal cavity. As with the heart injection, there will be no pain, but it may take a bit longer for the drug to be absorbed and the heart to completely stop.

The euthanasia drug is a concentrated solution of Phenobarbital, which causes the heart to stop beating and then the brain dies shortly thereafter. In rabbits, ferrets, rodents, other small mammals and birds, there may be a delay of few minutes between the injection and when the heart stops completely, particularly if the pet has poor circulation. In reptiles, this delay can take even longer due to their unique physiology and, as mentioned, if it was not possible to place the euthanasia solution into the heart. Please discuss the specific circumstances for reptiles with your veterinarian.

In some cases the pet's muscles may relax or contract after the pet has died. This can be very disconcerting if you are not aware of this possibility ahead of time. The muscles of the urinary bladder and the anus may relax, and your pet may void urine and stool. Involuntary contractions of muscles may result in the pet appearing to gasp, or move a leg. Again, remember your pet is not aware of these things happening since they happen after death. In almost all cases, the pet's eyes will not close after death.

Knowing what happens during euthanasia may help you and other family members

decide if they want to be present.

WHO SHOULD BE PRESENT DURING EUTHANASIA?

Many people wish to be present during their pet's euthanasia to say goodbye, to prevent feeling guilty for "abandoning" their pet, and to know what the death was like so they will not wonder about it in the future. Each individual, however, will need to decide for him or herself whether they want to be present during the euthanasia. Sometimes friends may encourage you one way or another, but it is ultimately your decision, and you need to do what is best for you.

If you do not feel you can be present during the euthanasia, please do not feel you are abandoning your pet. Your pet has experienced your love throughout his life, and if he could talk, you can imagine he would say he understands. Your pet will not be alone, the veterinarian and staff will be there with your pet, talking to him and petting him during the procedure.

In many cases, the individual family members wish to have some time alone with the pet both before and/or after the euthanasia. If you wish to be alone with your pet, you may still want a friend to accompany you to the veterinarian's office to provide support.

Whether children should be present during the euthanasia depends on the age and maturity of the child as well as other factors. Many experts feel it is best if children under the age of eight not be present during the procedure but can see and say good-bye to the pet before and after the euthanasia. If a young child is to be present it is vital that the child be counseled ahead of time by a child psychologist or another trained professional so she knows what to expect. It is also helpful if the veterinarian or staff can talk with the child and explain what will happen and why. Parents need to be ready to provide support and answer any question the child might have.

WHERE AND WHEN

In some instances you may have a choice as to where the euthanasia will occur. Some veterinarians will make house-calls, and will agree to euthanize your pet at home. Most people have their pets euthanized at a veterinary office and they often prefer a time when the clinic is less busy. Choose a time of day that will allow you to prepare yourself prior to the euthanasia, and have time for yourself afterwards. Some people prefer a Friday, so they can have the weekend to themselves; others think they may feel lonelier during the weekend and prefer the beginning of the week.

You may wish to bring your pet's favorite blanket or toys as a comforting presence. Some people have favorite music they wish to have played at the time of euthanasia. You may even consider saying a special poem or prayer for your pet before, during or after the procedure.

SAYING GOODBYE

People say goodbye to their pet in many ways, and at different times during the euthanasia. [Here are options for how a euthanasia might be done. Say your goodbyes at whatever time is appropriate for you.

- Be present through the entire euthanasia process from sedation to final euthanasia
- Be present but don't actually watch the final injection (turn away or close your eyes)
- Be present during the sedation and leave the room during the actual euthanasia. You may still wish to come back and visit with your pet after it is over
- Stay in another room while the euthanasia is performed and visit with your pet after it is over
- Leave your pet with the veterinarian and say goodbye at that time

Again, in many cases, the individual family members may wish to have some time alone with the pet both before and/or after the euthanasia to say their personal good-byes.

REMEMBRANCES

Many people wish to take something back home with them to remind them of their pet. It may be a lock of hair, a whisker, a clay imprint of the pet's paws or the pet's collar or nametag

OPTIONS FOR THE CARE OF YOUR PET'S BODY

You will need to make a decision as to how you want to care for your pet's body. Depending upon where you live, your finances, and other factors, there may be several alternatives for you. If you have asked your veterinarian to dispose of the body, it may be important for you to know how this is done.

Individual Cremation: Your pet's body can be cremated at a special facility that cremates pets, and the ashes can be returned to you in an urn either to keep or to scatter at a location you may choose.

Group Cremation: You may choose to have your pet cremated with other pets. In this case, the ashes are generally not returned.

Burial at Home: If it is allowed where you live (check your zoning restrictions), you may be able to bury your pet at home. Many people prefer this, but you should consider the fact you may move to a different home in the future.

Burial in a Pet Cemetery: Pet cemeteries are becoming more common, especially in urban areas.

Communal Burial: Sometimes options are limited, and pets may be buried together at a common site. Some pet cemeteries and humane shelters may offer this service.

However you choose to care for your pet's body, you may wish to bring along your pet's toy, coat, etc. to be included in the burial box, if this is allowed (it may not be for certain crematories). If you will be burying your pet, you will need to make arrangements regarding how you are going to transport your pet from the veterinarian's office to the burial site.

POST-MORTEM (in humans this is known as an autopsy)

A post-mortem is a medical examination of the body after death by your veterinarian. In some instances it may be important for you and your veterinarian to know about the disease or problem your pet had. If it was infectious, prevention measures may need to be taken with your other pets or animals, or people who may have had contact with your pet. Persons may want to know if their pet had a congenital or hereditary problem. Knowing what caused the disease of your pet may help you recover from the loss and relieve uncertainty. Post-mortems are done with respect and honor for the life of the pet. If you wish to view your pet's body after the procedure you should to ask for a cosmetic post-mortem to be done in which any incisions are sewn up, similar to a surgical procedure.

CARING FOR YOURSELF AFTERWARDS

You will need to take special care of yourself in the time immediately after the euthanasia. It will be best if you can have someone else drive you home and share the rest of the day with you. It is helpful to have plans for the rest of the day; a hike with your friend, dinner with someone who understands your grief, or putting a puzzle together with a friend. Understanding the grieving process and having various resources available such as pet loss hotlines and books on pet loss can also be beneficial. [See the handout *Grieving the Death of Your Pet* and our *Pet Loss Support* handout for more information].

TELLING OTHERS

You will need to decide with whom you will share your pet's death. You certainly need to share it with someone who understands and will support you. You may, however, know people who will not understand your grief. It may be best to refrain from sharing with these people until you feel more ready.

CONCLUSION

The decision to euthanize a pet is a difficult one. It is helpful to prepare yourself for it, if possible, by becoming informed and making choices regarding the logistics ahead of time. It is important to have one or more friends you can talk to and spend time with both prior to and after the euthanasia. The decision to be present during the euthanasia is a personal one, and you need to do what is best for you.