

EUTHANASIA IN DOGS Dr. Debra Primovic

General Practice & Preventative Medicine

OVERVIEW

Euthanasia literally means an “easy and painless death.” You may know it as “putting a pet to sleep” or “putting an animal down.” It is the deliberate act of ending life and undoubtedly it is a difficult issue. Pet owners who must make this decision often feel anxiety or even guilt, but when a pet is very ill with little hope of recovery, the question of “When is it time?” becomes most important.

It’s a common situation: Many pets suffer with chronic diseases such as cancer that can often be managed in such a way that life is prolonged, although the quality of life is greatly diminished. For most pet owners this issue greatly influences the decision concerning euthanasia. Certainly, quality of life is a personal judgment; you know your animal companion better than anyone else. And while your veterinarian can guide you with objective information about diseases, and even provide a personal perspective of a disease condition, the final decision about euthanasia rests with you.

VETERINARY CARE

If you are considering euthanasia, some of the following points may help you gauge your pet’s quality of life.

- Pets with chronic or incurable diseases that are given proper medication and care should be able to eat, drink and sleep comfortably without shortness of breath.
- Your pet should act interested in “what’s going on” around him, be able to perform mild exercise and have control of his urine and bowel movements (unless the principal disease affects one of these organ systems).
- Even your ill pet should appear comfortable and free of moderate to severe pain. Of course, whenever there is a chronic condition, some days will be better than others and one should learn to expect the natural “ups and downs” that attend most chronic disease conditions. You need to determine what balance is acceptable.

There are also veterinary issues and medical care issues that may influence your judgment. If your pet is taking medication for a disease condition, ask your veterinarian if side effects of the medicine could be involved with any adverse symptoms such as lack of appetite, vomiting or diarrhea (but DON’T stop giving prescribed medication until you speak with your veterinarian). Sometimes it is the medicine, not the disease, that makes a pet appear more ill and adjusting the dose or changing the medicine can have a very positive effect.

Of course, some diseases are very difficult, expensive or time-consuming to treat. The medical bills that may accumulate can influence your decision regarding euthanasia. These are practical decisions that



must be made relative to your own financial and family situations. Though a lack of financial or personal resources for medical care may be a source of guilt to you, it is better to discuss the overall situation with your veterinarian rather than allow your pet to suffer without proper veterinary medical care.

WILL IT HURT?

The following is a description of a typical euthanasia procedure. If you do not wish to read about this procedure, please close this document now.

Euthanasia is very humane and virtually painless. First, you will likely be asked to sign a paper – an “authorization for euthanasia” (or similar document). If you decide to go ahead you will be given a number of options: you may be present (with the pet) during the euthanasia; you may be absent for the procedure but wish to see your pet after euthanasia; or you may want to say goodbye to your pet prior to euthanasia and not see him again. Once you have decided upon your involvement in the euthanasia process, you will need to decide what you would like to have done with the remains. You can discuss your options with your veterinarian before the euthanasia procedure.

Euthanasia is usually performed by a veterinarian. The most typical procedure involves an intravenous injection of a barbiturate anesthetic given at a high concentration (overdose). In general, the euthanasia is rapid, usually within seconds, and very peaceful. Your pet will just go to sleep. On rare occasions there may be a brief vocalization or cry as consciousness is lost; this is not pain although you may misinterpreted it as such.

Within seconds of starting the injection the anesthetic overdose will cause the heart to slow and then stop, and any circulation in the body will cease. As the heart stops and the blood pressure decreases, the unconscious animal will stop breathing, circulation to the brain will cease and your pet will die peacefully.

Once your pet has died, you might observe involuntary muscle contractions or respiratory gasps about one or two minutes after the loss of consciousness and circulation. Again this is not evidence of pain or consciousness, but instead, it represents a physiologic response that occurs whenever the brain is deprived of circulation. The unconscious animal may also lose bladder or bowel control. Veterinarians often cover the pet immediately after injecting the euthanasia solution to partially shield the pet owner from these physiologic responses, which may still be disturbing.

HOME CARE

Keep your pet as comfortable as possible during any chronic illness or disease. Encourage him to eat and drink, unless your veterinarian has asked you not to do so, and keep him clean and dry. Speak with your veterinarian if you have any questions or concerns regarding the diagnosis or treatment of your pet's disease.

Pet loss by natural causes, trauma or euthanasia is always difficult, and there are pet loss support groups available throughout the country. If you have specific questions about euthanasia or you would like more information about pet loss support groups, please contact your veterinarian.



|