

WHEN TO CONSIDER EUTHANASIA IN DOGS

▫ General Practice & Preventative Medicine

A PET'S QUALITY OF LIFE

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.

WHAT AILING PETS SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO

If you are considering euthanasia, here are some guidelines to help you decide whether your pet would benefit. 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
- Act interested in what's going on around them
- Do mild exercise
- Have control of their urine and bowel movements - unless the disease affects one of these organ systems
- 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 must determine what balance is acceptable for your own situation. Speak with your veterinarian if you have any questions or concerns regarding the diagnosis or treatment of your pet's disease.

THE EFFECTS OF MEDICATION

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.

THE HIGH COST OF CARE

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.

THE HARDEST DECISION

Euthanasia – often referred to as “putting a pet to sleep” or “putting an animal down” – literally means an “easy and painless death.” It is the deliberate act of ending life, and pet owners that must make this decision often feel anxiety or even guilt.

Before the procedure is done, the pet owner will be asked to sign a paper that is an “authorization for euthanasia” or similar document. Euthanasia usually is performed by a veterinarian and is a humane and virtually painless procedure.

Most pet owners are given the following options for witnessing the procedure. They may be present with the pet during the euthanasia. They may wish to see their pet after euthanasia. Or they may want to say goodbye to their pet before the euthanasia and not see their pet after the procedure.

WILL IT HURT?

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

Euthanasia is very humane and virtually painless. First, you will be asked to sign a paper – an “authorization for euthanasia” (or similar document). 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.

AFTER THE GOODBYE

Before the euthanasia, discuss what you want done with the body with your veterinarian. Again, this is a matter of personal taste and preference.

- **Burial at home.** Many people who own their homes chose to bury their pet in their yards. Great care must be given to bury your pet deep enough – at least three feet - to deter predators. It is recommended to wrap your pet in plastic and place several large rocks on top of their remains before covering with earth. Many cities have ordinances against home burial so check with your local officials before laying your pet to rest.
- **Cemeteries.** Similar to human burial, a casket and headstone are selected. Services are available with or without viewing of the remains. Ask your veterinarian or check your local telephone directory to find a nearby pet cemetery.
- **Cremation.** Typically, cremation is available in most large cities. Some crematories will privately cremate your pet so you can save the ashes for scattering, burial or storing in an urn. Check with your veterinarian about contacting an animal crematory center.
- **Other options.** There are a few nontraditional choices available regarding the handling of pet remains. Some people choose to consult a taxidermist and others may be interested in cryogenics, which involves freezing the remains. Research and many telephone calls may be necessary to find sources for these options.