

Saying goodbye - options for euthanasia



The life expectancy of a pet is generally much longer than that of a wild animal. Breed also has a significant influence on lifespan. At some stage it may become obvious that your pet's life is drawing to a close. It is then that you will face a painful and difficult decision on whether your pet should be taken to the vet to be put gently and painlessly to sleep.

When is euthanasia necessary?

Euthanasia (often called 'putting to sleep') is the term used by vets for the process of preventing the suffering of an animal that is too old or sick to have a happy and fulfilled life. It is never an easy decision and many owners understandably delay making it for as long as possible. Pain is not the only form of suffering, quality of life is important too and there are a number of situations in which euthanasia is the kindest thing to do for your cat. Consider euthanasia if your pet is:

- Suffering untreatable pain.
- No longer able to eat or drink normally.
- Unable to breathe properly because their lungs and heart are diseased.
- No longer empty its bowels or bladder without pain or they are incontinent.
- Unable to stand or move normally.
- So blind, deaf or aged that it cannot cope with everyday living.
- Or if the emotional or financial demands of caring for your pet are more than you can manage.

What will happen?

Your vet may shave the fur from a patch of skin on one of your pet's front legs and insert a needle into a vein. Your pet will then give an overdose of a drug (similar to an anaesthetic). This will make your pet lose consciousness (and they will no longer be able to feel pain or fear). Your pet will be asleep in a very short time (usually a matter of seconds). Breathing and heart beat will stop a few seconds later. If your pet is fearful or aggressive it will often be given a sedative before the fatal injection is given.

Will my pet suffer?

The process is completely painless. In its last moments your cat may give a gasp. Your pet is asleep and the sound is caused by a spasm of muscles that is perfectly normal. Other muscles in your pet's body may also twitch and, as its body relaxes, your pet may empty his bowels or bladder.

Should I be there at the end?

Discuss in advance with your vet whether you wish to be with your pet when it is put to sleep. It may be less stressful for your pet to be held in your arms and to be able to hear a familiar voice. You may be comforted by knowing that your old friend suffered no pain and met a peaceful end. However, if you are frightened or anxious your pet may sense this and may also become upset.

Can my cat be put to sleep at home?

Vets usually prefer to see their patients at the clinic where all the equipment and trained staff they need is close at hand. But euthanasia is a special situation for both the vet and yourself and, if you want to have your animal put to sleep in its own home then most vets will do this.

When is the right time for euthanasia?

It is you who must decide whether, or when, euthanasia is the right thing for your pet. Your vet will be able to advise you on what the options are and make a sensible recommendation but will not make the decision for you. It is rare that a decision has to be made on the spur of the moment, so it is much better to make your choice after talking it over with your vet and with other members of your family.

It is important that all members of the family are involved in the decision-making process and that they are all in agreement. Do not exclude children from this - talking with them before the decision has been made may help them to come to terms with it.

How will I feel?

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It is perfectly natural to feel grief after losing a pet and there is no shame in feeling strong emotions. Sometimes the first response to a pet's death is anger or guilt. Often people wonder whether anyone could have done more for their pet. The depth of friendship with pets may be greater than that of many human friends and a period of mourning is quite normal. However, people experience grief in different ways and there are no hard and fast rules about what you will feel. It may help to have someone to take you home after your cat has been put to sleep so that you do not have to return to an empty house. Talking to friends and family is important, especially your children (if you have any).

How will my children cope?

Losing a pet is often the first time that a child becomes aware of death. It is usually best to be honest with a child and explain the truth as clearly as you can. Children may want time to say goodbye to their pet and seeing the dead body may help them understand what has happened. It can be very therapeutic to mark the occasion with some kind of memorial such as a burial. Talking about the happy times you shared will often help them and you to come to terms with the change in your lives. Children frequently get over the loss of a pet much more quickly than do adults.

What happens to my pet's body?

Your vet will explain what can be done with the body of your pet. They can arrange for your cat to be cremated, or you may choose to bury the body yourself. If you want to bury your pet in your garden check first with your local authority that this is allowed and make sure that the body is buried at least 2 feet (about 600 mm) below the surface. If your pet is cremated it is usually possible for your vet to arrange for you to have its ashes returned, but you must inform them of your wishes at the time of euthanasia.

Should I get another pet?

After the experience of losing a pet some people say they never want to own another pet. However, many others find that getting another pet helps them deal with their grief. The relationship you build with another pet will never be the same as the one you had, but it can be equally rewarding.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Orwell Veterinary Group on 01473 333677 and we will be happy to advise you.