

## Euthanasia

### If It Should Be

Euthanasia ("good death") refers to a deliberate intervention carried out to relieve pain or other suffering; this is usually pain or suffering that cannot be cured or managed adequately.

Euthanasia is one of the most difficult decisions anyone can ever make for their pet with a number of different, and at times conflicting, emotions existing concurrently. The overriding emotion is typically to 'do the right thing' for your beloved companion, to fulfil your commitment and responsibility as their friend and caretaker to relieve their suffering. Although in time this usually will be a decision that acts as a source of comfort, especially early on, it can be conflicted by guilt or confusion, for example that the decision was made too late or indeed too soon (euthanasia remorse). And of course the loving and courageous decision also comes with the knowledge of impending pain and upset due to grief and bereavement. To end a pet's suffering, we must unselfishly and lovingly choose to accept our own.

It can be tempting to think that rather than having your pet euthanased, it is better to keep him/her at home indefinitely and to 'let nature take its course', to wait until he/she 'passes away peacefully in his/her sleep'. However despite being very ill, it can take a long period of time for 'natural' death to come. In the

*If it should be that I grow frail and weak  
And pain should keep me from my sleep,  
Then will you do what must be done,  
For this -- the last battle -- can't be won.*

*You will be sad I understand,  
But don't let grief then stay your hand,  
For on this day, more than the rest,  
Your love and friendship must stand the test.*

*We have had so many happy years,  
You wouldn't want me to suffer so.  
When the time comes, please, let me go.*

*Take me where, to my needs they'll tend,  
Only, stay with me till the end  
And hold me firm and speak to me  
Until my eyes no longer see.*

*I know in time you will agree  
It is a kindness you do to me.  
Although my tail its last has waved,  
From pain and suffering I have been saved.*

*Don't grieve that it must be you  
Who has to decide this thing to do;  
We've been so close - we two - these years,  
Don't let your heart hold any tears.*

*(Author Unknown)*

meantime your pet may be painful, unable to eat or drink resulting in dehydration and malnutrition, incontinent, collapsed or struggling to breathe. Undoubtedly some animals may die peacefully and comfortably at home in what can be a very moving and 'natural' experience. However this option is only recommended to be chosen if excellent end-of-life/hospice care can be provided by a team with the right set of expertise. Such teams are currently very limited not just in the United Kingdom but worldwide, and at the present time most veterinary professionals would recommend that euthanasia is performed to try and safeguard your pet's welfare and avoid any unnecessary suffering.

## When is the right time?

As a general rule it is better to perform euthanasia sooner rather than later as waiting too long involves continued unnecessary suffering. Deciding when the time is right is a very individual and personal decision that only you and your family can make. However you should listen to what your pet is telling you through his/her demeanour and behaviour – and of course to advice from your vet, friends, pet bereavement counsellors and others (e.g. the forums on the Ralph site).

Unfortunately pets do not tend to communicate clear signals to us that it is the right time, that they are 'ready to die'. It is therefore our duty to make this judgment by considering questions such as:

- How much do you think your pet is still enjoying life? Does he/she still seem happy?
- Is their overall quality of life still acceptable? Factors to consider include:
  - Evidence of discomfort
  - Appetite
  - Mobility
  - Urinary/faecal continence
  - Mental capacity/confusion
  - Breathing effort
- What is the prognosis associated with any illnesses your pet has?
- Are there treatment options available and if so, how aggressive, invasive or uncomfortable are they likely to be? Is treatment in your pet's best interest overall or more stressful than the condition itself? Will treatment actually diminish, rather than enhance, his/her quality of that life?

You should discuss these questions with your veterinary surgeon as much as possible and ask for advice about what signs and stages of illness to look out for. Although not always the case, it is often possible to assess your pet's quality of life over a period of time and judge whether he/she is having more bad days than good ones. Being well informed about the illness and what to look out for can help you decide in advance on an appropriate end-

point that triggers euthanasia thereby minimising the amount of suffering your pet endures – for example it may be when he/she stops eating for more than one day or can no longer exercise without struggling to breathe.

For pets that are ill another important consideration is the cost of any treatment available. If you do not feel able to afford the cost of treatment then it is absolutely right and reasonable that this should be a factor in making the euthanasia decision. Ultimately it is in neither your nor your pet's interest for treatment to be partially commenced only to be discontinued due to financial constraints and you should try not to feel guilty or judged if cost is a significant factor in your decision.

Essentially the decision to have your pet euthanased should be made with his/her best interests at the forefront of your mind, based on realistic and reasonable expectations of prognosis and what can be medically achieved, and with the one true knowledge that euthanasia in all cases brings peace and relief from pain and suffering to your beloved companion.

## Preparing for euthanasia

One of the ways to minimise the stress and distress associated with euthanasia is to inform yourself about what is involved and to make sure that the whole procedure is carried out in a place and in a way that you are as comfortable as possible with. Being prepared and informed will hopefully minimise any future feelings of guilt or 'I wish we had done it differently'.

Some animals are euthanased following an acute deterioration or a sudden onset illness and there is little or no time to prepare. However if there is time, some things to consider include:

a) **Euthanasia at home versus at your veterinary practice:** most veterinary practices offer euthanasia at home. This is not suitable for everyone but some benefits include your pet remaining in a familiar and less stressful environment, for example in their favourite spot in the house, and often a quieter and more private experience for the family. Potential disadvantages include:

- The process can be practically more awkward from the veterinarian's point of view
- There is less ability to deal with any complications that may arise, albeit rarely
- There is likely to be less flexibility in terms of when the vet can come out to the home
- The cost may be greater

- Some people find having euthanasia done at home worsens their grief as there is a more tangible reminder of the experience

If euthanasia is performed at home, most veterinarians will be willing to take your pet's body away with them for aftercare depending on your preferred option (see *Aftercare*).

If euthanasia is to be performed at your practice, consider taking your pet's favourite bed or blanket with you for him/her to lie on during the procedure.

b) **Timing:** it is important to consider both the time of the day and the day of the week. For example, it might be best to book an appointment at a time when the practice is likely to be quietest so that the appointment is not rushed; or you may want to schedule a time such that your pet can have a final meal or walk before being taken to the practice. With respect to the day of the week, you may need to consider for example whether you are able to take some time off work to grieve or whether you prefer to coincide euthanasia with the weekend. As mentioned above, if euthanasia is to be performed at home, timing may to some extent be restricted by availability of the veterinarian. You may also wish to arrange a time when the children are away from the home depending on what has been decided in terms of their presence during the procedure (see *Should I be present?*).

When you arrive at the practice for the euthanasia appointment, you may prefer to wait in the car with your pet and ask to be called in when the vet is ready so that you can go straight into the consultation room.

c) **Veterinary staff:** in many cases, an individual vet, and sometimes a nurse, will have been mostly responsible for your pet's care and will have developed a relationship with both you and your pet, potentially over several years. Consider this when booking the appointment as it is generally more comforting to have euthanasia done by practice staff with whom both your pet and you are familiar. However also remember that if for whatever reason you would rather not have this vet present, it is perfectly acceptable to request an alternate clinician.

d) **Aftercare** (see *Aftercare*)

## The process of euthanasia

Euthanasia should be a quick, peaceful and virtually pain-free procedure for your pet, regardless of where it is performed. The standard euthanasia process is as follows:

1. Your pet is made as comfortable as possible, for example lying on a soft bed.

2. A nurse or other suitable assistant will usually help to hold your pet; if you are present for the euthanasia (see *Should I be present?*) it is usually possible for you to continue to stroke, talk to and comfort your pet.
3. The veterinarian will clip a patch of fur on one of your pet's legs – usually a front leg – over the site of a blood vessel (vein).
4. The veterinarian will then place an intravenous catheter (cannula) into the vein and check that it is working fine by flushing some saline solution through the catheter.

Note that not all veterinarians routinely place an intravenous catheter – some tend to inject the euthanasia solution directly from a syringe via a needle into the vein. However the use of an intravenous catheter is to be recommended as it ensures that the euthanasia solution does not leak out of the vein which can be painful. In addition, once the catheter is placed, it is usually then possible to relax the restraint on your pet and allow you more access to him/her while euthanasia is performed. You should feel free to discuss the use of an intravenous catheter with your vet and make your wishes known. Please note that some practices will charge a small additional fee for the use of an intravenous catheter and you may need to clarify this.

In some cases a sedative is administered to relax your pet and allow the intravenous catheter to be placed with minimum distress, or once the intravenous catheter has been placed to ensure euthanasia goes smoothly. However this is not done in all cases and it depends for example on the behaviour and demeanour of your pet and other circumstances related to the euthanasia. It is advisable to discuss this beforehand with your practice and clarify your wishes in advance; where there is any doubt, the use of a sedative is recommended.

5. The next step is for the vet to administer the euthanasia solution via the intravenous catheter. The euthanasia solution contains a drug called pentobarbital that used to be used as a general anaesthetic drug; the current solutions used are often coloured blue, yellow or pink. Euthanasia is essentially achieved by administering an overdose of this anaesthetic drug and your pet will therefore be unconscious at the time of death; he/she will experience no awareness of the end of their life. The drug works very quickly, typically within seconds, and causes your pet's muscles to relax, breathing to cease, and finally heart to stop beating. The vet will check your pet's heart has stopped beating and confirm to you that 'he/she has gone'.

Note that in some cases the animal may void urine or stools or for example gasp or twitch. It is essential to realise that these are reflexes that can occur despite the lack of a heart beat and you should not interpret these reflexes as a sign that your pet is still alive.

It is also important to realise that when animals die their eyes typically remain open.

Following euthanasia, you can if you want spend a few moments alone with your pet saying goodbye depending on the aftercare arrangements. Some people like to take a tuft of fur or a whisker or the pet tag/collar as a memento.

Please note that the above euthanasia process applies to the euthanasia of adult dogs and cats and the process may vary with other species or for puppies/kittens although the same euthanasia solution is used. For example, with rabbits a leg vein may be used as for dogs/cats but sometimes a vein in the ear is used depending on the rabbit's size. Rodents and small furies are often anaesthetised in an anaesthetic induction gas chamber before the euthanasia solution is applied into the abdominal cavity (around the liver). You should discuss the euthanasia process for your particular pet with your practice beforehand.

## Should I be present?

Being present while your pet is euthanased can obviously be an emotionally distressing experience and some people simply cannot face it; others would rather not see their pet in the dead state preferring instead to remember them as they were alive. Some owners are not present during the euthanasia but do then spend a few moments saying goodbye afterwards.

There is much to be said for you being present during the euthanasia. As your pet's best and most trusted friend, it is logical to think that you being there will provide your pet with the maximum amount of comfort possible; some owners that are not present during euthanasia go on to feel a considerable sense of guilt that they abandoned their pet during their final moments. Furthermore being present during euthanasia will allow you to witness that it was quick and peaceful and therefore eliminate any worry about how distressing your pet's final moments were.

Although there are no hard and fast rules, in general it is recommended to stay with your pet during euthanasia. However, if you feel that your own emotional responses and grief will worsen rather than alleviate your pet's stress then perhaps being present is not sensible.

Whether or not children should be present during euthanasia very much depends on factors such as the age and maturity of the child as well as their individual personality. This is a decision that parents are best placed to make but your veterinarian may be able to advise you; also some practices may have a policy discouraging children being present so it is wise to discuss this in advance if possible.

Another consideration may be deciding who else (if anyone) you would like to have present during the euthanasia. If you wish to be alone during the procedure, you may still want to

ask a friend or family member to accompany you to the appointment so you will have support before and afterward. It is also important to make sure that you do not drive home in a distraught state and this individual can therefore also drive you home. Alternatively, you can take a taxi and return some other time to collect your vehicle from the veterinary practice.

## Aftercare

Once your pet has been euthanased, there are a number of different aftercare options. It is often possible for veterinary practices to keep pets bodies 'on hold' in a cold room if you need more time to make a decision about aftercare after euthanasia has been performed. However if time allows, it is definitely better to discuss aftercare options beforehand with your family and your veterinary practice, and try to make a decision before the final day. This will help to minimise the stress of the final day and also to make sure that you are not trying to make a decision about aftercare in an emotionally distraught state immediately after your pet's euthanasia when your judgment may be impaired and you may make a hasty decision that you later regret.

One of the first decisions that you may need to consider is whether your pet should have a post-mortem or not (see *Should my pet have a post-mortem?*).

There are a number of different aftercare options and ideally you should choose the one which you feel best preserves the memory of your pet. In reality the final choice often depends on a combination of personal/spiritual, practical and financial considerations.

As far as spiritual considerations are concerned, some people for example do not believe in the concept of a 'soul'; others do not feel that their pet's soul and spirituality is linked in any way to their physical remains. These individuals may therefore place less emphasis on aftercare options. For others, having the physical remains in close proximity provides a greater sense of on-going spiritual closeness to their pet or simply a greater sense of comfort. These considerations are entirely natural and extremely important. You will most likely know your own preferred option for aftercare intuitively. However it is important to make sure that the final decision is a family one and to remember that there is no right or wrong decision, just differences in opinion.

Options include:

## 1. Cremation:

There are a large number of pet crematoria available (see *Pet Crematoria and Cemeteries*), many of whom offer visits of their premises as well as other services such as memorial gardens. Most veterinary practices will use the services of one particular crematorium often developing a relationship over several years. In general the pet crematorium will collect your pet's body from the practice for cremation (collections are typically twice a week). However should you prefer you are free to enlist the services of a different crematorium; it would be sensible to clarify this beforehand with your practice.

If you decide to have your pet cremated, the next decision is whether to have a communal or an individual cremation:

### **a. Communal cremation:**

This is when your pet's body is cremated along with the bodies of other people's pets; in some pet crematoria the ashes are then scattered in a garden of remembrance. Following a communal cremation it may be possible to have token ashes returned to you – however you must remember that these may or may not be from your own pet. A communal cremation is typically significantly less expensive than an individual cremation.

### **b. Individual cremation:**

This is when your pet's body is cremated individually and it is therefore possible to have his/her ashes returned. Most crematoria offer a number of different urns, caskets or scatter boxes according to your preference and it is worth researching and deciding this beforehand – e.g. do you want to keep the ashes in the home, bury them in the garden or scatter them in one of your pet's favourite spots or on their favourite walk? It may also be possible to have the ashes returned in a less elaborate container while having an urn or casket made privately to suit your own design requirement – you will find links to selected makers of pet urns/caskets here. In general it takes up to 2 weeks following euthanasia for your pet's ashes to be returned.

One of the questions owners often ask is "how do I know that my pet has been cremated individually and these are actually his/her ashes?". In general it is not possible for you to witness the cremation process but some crematoria may allow this. Most crematoria however are very happy for you to visit them and see the process involved once your pet has been collected from your practice up to the point of actual cremation. Furthermore,



many pet crematoria are well-established family-run enterprises set up by pet lovers and built on a reputation for trust and compassion.

## 2. Burial:

As an alternate to cremation, you can choose to have your pet's body buried. If you decide to have a burial then the next decision is where; the two main options are at a pet cemetery or in your own property.

### **a. Pet cemetery:**

A number of pet crematoria also offer burial services (see Pet Crematoria and Cemeteries), and in some cases it is possible to hold a form of funeral service prior to burial. You should research this well in advance of the day of euthanasia if possible, including discussing options for coffins with the cemetery. You will find links to selected makers of pet coffins [here](#).

Advantages of using a pet cemetery include: cemetery staff prepare the grave and perform the actual burial – this is especially useful for large dogs; cemetery staff will maintain the grave; the burial site is likely to be more permanent; using a formal pet cemetery may convey a greater sense of respect and commemoration. Disadvantages include greater cost compared with a home burial, including possible on-going maintenance costs, and often a greater distance to travel when you want to visit the grave.

### **b. Home burial:**

Rather than burying their pet's ashes, many owners prefer to bury their pet's body at home in the garden, and it is possible to order headstones or other ornaments to mark the grave site. If a home burial is performed it is important to ensure that the grave is sufficiently deep (1.25 metres deep is the recommendation) to try and ensure that your pet's body is not dug up and scavenged; covering the grave site with rocks/stones for example is also advisable to prevent other animals from digging up the area. Your pet's body being dug up can be very distressing for you and it is also worthwhile to remember that the euthanasia drug administered to your pet may be harmful to any animal that subsequently ingests the drug. When digging the grave site, be careful also to avoid electricity cables, water pipes or similar. Also avoid placing your pet's body in a plastic bag as these are usually non-biodegradable meaning that the bag and its contents will not be able to degrade naturally over time.

Advantages of a home burial include the fact that the garden at home is often one of your pet's favourite spots; it is close by allowing you to visit and maintain the grave as you like and providing a continued sense of closeness to your pet. Furthermore some people are

more comfortable with holding a funeral or memorial service on their own property rather than at a pet cemetery.

Disadvantages of home burial include the fact that digging a deep grave and burying your pet can be manually very difficult when bigger dogs are involved. In addition, should you choose to move home you will usually no longer be able to visit the grave site or ensure that the site is not dug up or used for another purpose. Home burial is not usually an option for rental properties and it may also be advisable to check with your local authority that it is allowed even in a property that you own yourself.

Another option that some owners consider with respect to burial is to try and bury their pet in a public place that the pet liked to visit – e.g. a local park or forest. However it is essential to check with your local authority whether this is allowed – and it often will not be. Furthermore graves in public spaces are more vulnerable to interference and desecration.

Many pet owners choose to have one or more personal items buried or cremated with their pet's body – for example a special toy, blanket, name tag etc. The crematorium will be able to advise on what is allowed.

Lastly, you may wish to clip a bit of your pet's fur as a keepsake.

## Should my pet have a post-mortem?

As with many of the decisions around the loss of a pet, this to a large extent is a matter of personal opinion. In many cases a post-mortem may not even be discussed as being appropriate – this usually applies to pets in which a diagnosis has already been made or there are multiple different problems classified as being due to 'old age'. However there are a number of pets that die or are euthanased on welfare grounds due to deterioration in their condition in which the cause of their illness is not known. A discussion about post-mortem is appropriate in such cases.

A post-mortem can provide more information about the illness or injury that resulted in the death of your pet. For some people this information can help to provide reassurance that the decision to euthanase their pet was the right one and can bring a sense of closure. Even if this is not the case, many people like to think that their pet's death can contribute in some way to advancing veterinary medicine and helping to treat other animals; in complicated cases where a diagnosis has not been made beforehand, post-mortem can provide valuable scientific information.

Nevertheless some people are really not comfortable with the thought of their pet undergoing an invasive procedure such as a post-mortem; they feel that this would be to violate their pet in death. In other cases, people do not think that any information obtained



will provide them personally with a sense of closure – “it won’t bring him/her back”. In many cases the cost of a post-mortem falls to the owner and this must be borne in mind, and it must always be remembered that the post-mortem may prove inconclusive. Finally, following a post-mortem, it is typically not possible for your pet’s body to be returned for burial and cremation is usually the only aftercare option available.

There are therefore arguments for and against a post-mortem, which depend to an extent on the patient in question. There are personal, scientific and financial considerations and the most important thing is that you must be comfortable with the decision you make. It is usually preferable for a post-mortem to be performed as soon as possible after death and you should therefore try and discuss this beforehand with your veterinarian if you do want a post-mortem to be performed. This is very important as not all veterinary practices can access post-mortem services in the necessary timeframe and special arrangements may need to be made.