



PET BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

How do I decide when the time has come to have my pet euthanised?

Owning a pet is a terrible responsibility – we care for them, and look after them, and love them, but sometimes the best way to show that love is to be able to say goodbye when the pain or the suffering becomes too much. However, that can be a really hard call to make – especially as, sadly, pets rarely die peacefully in their sleep. Normally, they struggle on and on, with life becoming increasingly difficult and painful – and that’s something we need to be able to help with.

So, how do I decide?

The first thing to do is to think about your pet, as an individual. It is useful to do this before they become old and ill, but you can do it at any time. Firstly, make a list of all the things your pet loves doing most – the things that their life wouldn’t be worth living without. This will, of course, vary from pet to pet – which is why it’s important that you do this; even as vets, we can’t do it for you!

Then, secondly, make a list of the things they really hate, the things they truly cannot stand.

When they become old, or ill, you’ll be able to take those lists out and compare them with your pet’s current life.

Are they still having a good quality of life?

Can they still do the things they love?

Are they able to avoid (mostly!) doing the things they hate?

Are they getting more good days than bad?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, then you need to take a long think about their quality of life and decide if it’s time to say goodbye

How do I prepare myself and my family?

It is usually best to get everyone on-side. If necessary, bring your family and your pet to the surgery, and one of our vets will be able to talk to you about quality of life issues, to help everyone make a collective decision.

In the case of children, it’s really important to make sure they’re kept “in the loop” – even if you decide that they aren’t ready to be involved in planning the decision, make sure you “signpost” it really well – that the pet is really ill, and (for example) very old;

or that they are in a lot of pain or suffering. You may well find that doing this helps you to gain some perspective as well.

What will happen when we decide to have them euthanised?

Although it's a common turn of phrase, "put to sleep" isn't always a helpful phrase (we'll discuss why a little later). The technical term is euthanasia, which literally means "a good death".

If possible, make an appointment well in advance. We try to arrange these appointments for quiet times of the day to allow enough time for you and your pet. It is also possible for us to arrange to do a home visit.

If your pet is stressed or anxious, we may give them a sedative to help them settle, and we'll often leave you alone with them for a few minutes while that starts to work. Then, a small area of fur (usually on a forelimb) will be clipped so we can see the vein, and a veterinary nurse will give your pet a big hug while raising that vein. The vet will put some surgical spirit onto the skin (because it makes the vein easier to see). They will then give an injection of an anaesthetic. It isn't a nasty poison or anything painful – it's just a massive dose of anaesthetic, so they go peacefully to sleep and don't wake up.

You can stay in the room while we work. Some choose to stay in the waiting room during the procedure and then visit their pet afterwards, spending a few moments in private. It's entirely up to you, but whether you stay or not, we'll still treat your pet with the respect they deserve. If you do stay don't be alarmed if there are some movements or even gasps after the injection. This isn't them reacting or suffering, but simple reflexes, and it doesn't mean anything has gone wrong.

You can take your pet home for burial or you may choose to leave your pet with us for cremation. There are two choices, either 'routine cremation' where your pet will be cremated alongside other pets, or 'individual cremation' where he/she will be cremated on their own and the ashes are returned to us for you to collect from the surgery in a casket of your choice.

It is possible to discuss the options in more detail prior to the appointment, so that everything is arranged. We use a local family-run crematorium, Meadow Wood, which has built up an exceptionally good rapport with us over the years, so you do not need to worry that your pet is not in safe hands. Visit their [website](#) to find out more about the cremation options available; they do also offer a burial service.

Afterwards...

It's quite normal to feel grief, anger, depression or even guilt – these are normal parts of the grieving process. However, everyone deals with grief in their own way, so try to be supportive of people who seem to move through the process faster, or more slowly, than you do. Don't beat yourself up believing, though, that "it was just a pet" – they were part of your family!

Children in particular need to be handled carefully at this time. However, it doesn't matter how young they are, they should always be told the truth – don't lie to them to save their feelings, as this is usually severely counterproductive. In addition, it is not unknown for children to develop a phobia about bed-time because they had it drilled into them that their beloved pet was “put to sleep and didn't wake up”, which is why we are reluctant to use the phrase if young children are involved.

How they understand death and handle grief will vary with age as well as maturity and temperament.

Support

For that extra support...

There are several support groups who specialise in pet loss counselling if you need that extra chat. Never feel ashamed for having strong feelings over the loss of your pet, you are not alone. Here are the details of one service -

The Pet Bereavement Support Service (which is part of the Blue Cross for Pets) is a telephone helpline and email service that offers support to bereaved pet owners, through a national network of trained volunteer befrienders. Telephone 0800 096 6606 (seven days a week 8.30am-8.30pm).

We do also offer bereavement support at the surgery if required with our receptionist Donna Wilkinson, who is a qualified bereavement support advisor.

If you're not sure whether it's time, please give us a ring and talk to one of our team. They'll do everything they can to help you, whether, in terms of medical care or helping you to decide, we're here for you and your pet.

Please note

This article is written with cats & dogs in mind, however if you need advice regarding a different pet species please don't hesitate to contact the surgery on 01803 606059 or 01803 843836.