

HOW WILL I KNOW IT'S TIME?

The most important question a veterinarian answers

Making the decision to euthanize a pet can feel gut-wrenching, murderous, and immoral. Families feel like they are letting their pet down or that they are the cause of their friend's death. Remember that euthanasia is a gift, something that, when used appropriately and timely, prevents further physical suffering for the pet and emotional suffering of the family. Making the actual decision is the hardest part of the experience. We are asked on a daily basis, "Doc, how will I know when it's time?" Let us shed some light on this difficult discussion.

There is not one perfect moment in time in which to make that choice (unless the pet is truly suffering, something we're trying to prevent in the first place!). This time period could be hours, days, weeks, or even months. Before this subjective period of time, veterinarians will refuse to euthanize a pet because a good quality of life still exists. After this period, however, we may push for euthanasia due to obvious sustained suffering. During this larger subjective time however, it is truly dependent on the family to make the best decision for you with your vet's guidance. Some owners need time to come to terms with the decline of their pet while others want to prevent any unnecessary suffering at all. Everyone is different and entitled to their own thoughts. After all, pet owners know their pet better than anyone, even the vet!

PAIN AND ANXIETY

Pain is one of the most important topics that we discuss in veterinary hospice care. Many professionals believe that carnivorous animals, such as cats and dogs, do not "hide" their pain, rather pain simply doesn't bother them the same way it bothers humans. Animals do not have an emotional attachment to their pain like we do. Humans react to the diagnosis of cancer much differently than Fluffy does! Fluffy doesn't know she has a terminal illness, it bothers us more than it bothers her. This is vastly different than prey animals like rabbits or guinea pigs, who must hide their pain to prevent carnivorous attacks. If you're interested in learning more about pain and suffering in pets, grab Temple Grandin's book *Animals in Translation* and read chapter 5.

When discussing the decision to euthanize, we should be just as concerned about anxiety in our pet as we are about pain. Frankly, anxiety is worse than pain in animals. Think about the last time your dog went to the vet. How did he behave? Was he nervous? Did he give you that look that said "this is terrible!"? Now think back to when he last hurt himself, perhaps scraping his paw or straining a muscle. Pets rarely look as distraught when they are in pain as when they are anxious. It's the same for animals that are dying. For example, many end-stage arthritis canine patients begin panting, pacing, whining, and/or crying, but many of these symptoms are due to anxiety, usually arising secondarily from the pain.

The body is telling the carnivorous pet that he is no longer at the top of the food chain; he has been demoted and if he lies down, he will most likely become another animal's dinner.

"Just as we have an epidural to make coming into this world less physically painful (though not necessary), we have euthanasia to make going out of this world less physically painful (though again, not necessary)."

— Dr. Dani McVety, Founder, Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice

This guide was donated by the Lap of Love Foundation to support the mission that pets are family. For more resources on geriatric and end of life care, please visit LapofLove.com.

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WAITING TOO LONG

In our experience with thousands of families, the more times a pet parent experiences the loss of a pet, the sooner they make the decision to euthanize. Owners experiencing the decline or terminal illness of a pet for the first time will generally wait until the very end to make that difficult decision. They are fearful of doing it too soon and giving up without a good fight. Afterwards, however, there is most often a sense of regret for waiting too long. They reflect back on the past days, weeks, or months, and feel guilty for putting their pet through those numerous trips to the vet or uncomfortable medical procedures that did not improve their pet's quality of life. The next time they witness the decline of a pet, they are much more likely to make the decision at the beginning of the decline instead of the end. As we say to families daily, "It is better to help a friend a day too early than a second too late."



WHAT ABOUT A NATURAL DEATH?

Yes, there are those pets that peacefully fall asleep and pass naturally on their own, but just as in humans, this is rare. Many owners fear their pet "passing alone" while others do not. Occasionally we are asked to help families through the natural dying process with their pet. For different reasons, these families are against euthanasia. We explain everything we possibly can from how a natural death may look, how long it may take, what their pet may experience, etc. Remember that euthanasia also means a "good death;" our pets literally go to sleep and don't wake back up. Additionally, though we may desire a natural passing, it's important to remember that Mother Nature doesn't always have a better, less painful plan!

WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS CAREFULLY

If the most important thing to you is waiting until the last possible minute to say goodbye to your baby, you will most likely be facing an emergency, stress-filled, sufferable condition for your pet. It may not be peaceful and you may regret waiting too long. If a peaceful, calm, loving, family-oriented end of life experience is what you wish for your pet, then you will probably need to make the decision a little sooner than you want. Making that decision should not be about ceasing any suffering that has already occurred, but about preventing suffering from occurring in the first place. But remember, you aren't making this decision alone, your veterinarian is here to guide you!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

HOW WILL I KNOW IT'S TIME? *VIDEO*

www.LapofLove.com/Quality-of-Life/How-Will-I-Know-It-Is-Time

COMMON DISEASES

www.LapofLove.com/Education/Common-Diseases

COMMON SYMPTOMS

www.LapofLove.com/Education/Common-Symptoms

PET MOBILITY ISSUES

www.LapofLove.com/Education/Pet-Mobility-Issues

GERIATRIC VETERINARY PATIENTS

www.LapofLove.com/Education/Geriatic_Veterinary_Patients

DETERMINING PET QUALITY OF LIFE

www.LapofLove.com/Quality-of-Life/Determining-Pet-Quality-of-Life

QUALITY OF LIFE SCORING TOOLS

www.LapofLove.com/Quality-of-Life/Quality-of-Life-Scoring-Tools

PET HOSPICE JOURNAL

www.PetHospiceJournal.com

ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

www.LapofLove.com/Education/Anticipatory-Grief

GREY MUZZLE QUALITY OF LIFE CALENDAR APP (iPhone & Android)

www.LapofLove.com/Quality-of-Life/Grey-Muzzle



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