



Quality of Life

When deciding to euthanize your pet, quality of life is a primary determinant for such a painful decision. It is often very difficult to determine if your pet has a good quality of life, or if it is experiencing excess suffering. This document outlines some factors to consider when attempting to assess your pet's quality of life.

Mobility

Older pets often lose mobility. An older dog may no longer be able to climb stairs, and an older cat may not be able to jump on your bed anymore. Even with reduced mobility, your pet may still be healthy and happy. Accommodations can easily be made for your less-mobile pet.

If your pet can barely move, quality of life is likely poor. Is your pet able to get to its feet without your help? Can it sit or lie down without collapsing? Can it walk, or handle basic functions like squatting over a litter box?

Appetite/Eating Ability

Is your pet able to eat? Can it consume and digest enough food to maintain proper nourishment? Is it unable to chew, or does it have difficulty swallowing? A pet that is unable to eat or gain sufficient nourishment from its food is probably experiencing starvation.

Breathing

Quite a few illnesses, including cancer, affect the lungs. When a condition causes the lungs to fill with fluid or foreign matters (like cancer cells), a pet is unable to breathe easily or comfortably. Your pet may appear to be panting or having difficulty breathing. Its stomach may mimic a pumping motion, because its chest muscles can no longer support inhalation and exhalation. It may also experience wheezing attacks. If any of these symptoms occur, consult with our veterinarian about taking chest X-rays to evaluate your pet's lung health. If this problem is due to an allergy, infection or asthma, it may be resolved with medication. If the problem is due to cancer or a heart condition, treatment is much more difficult.

Discomfort

It may be difficult to determine if your pet is in pain, because animals will instinctively hide discomfort. Try to monitor your pet's posture and expression. Does its face appear worried, rather than relaxed and happy? Does it sit hunched and tense, or is it relaxed and lying down? Lack of mobility is another sign of pain, as is "denning." Animals in pain will seek a safe spot where they will not be disturbed by others. If your pet avoids its usual areas for more secluded places, this could be a sign that it is in distress and feels vulnerable.

A more obvious indication of pain is a pet's reaction to touch. If your pet responds to your touch by hissing, flinching away or even snapping at you, it is most likely in pain. This may indicate localized pain, or a broader sense of discomfort.

Incontinence

Incontinence is stressful for both pets and owners. Basic survival instinct tells an animal not to go to the bathroom where they sleep, because the smell would draw attention to the location of the animal's den. If an animal can't control when or where it urinates and defecates, this is a sign of poor quality of life.

Mental Capacity

Older pets sometimes show signs of reduced mental capacity. They may forget things, such as the location of their toys or what a command means. They may become confused by their surroundings, which may cause fear.

Happiness

Whether or not your pet is enjoying life is a subjective decision you will need to make. If you have keenly observed your pet's behavior and attitude throughout its life, you will most likely be able to sense when it is no longer happy. You will notice when your pet no longer takes pleasure from its food, toys surrounding, and from you and the rest of its family.

Response to Treatment

When a pet becomes ill, we naturally try to provide whatever treatment we can. This could mean tests, medications or surgery. These are not always the best option; drugs have side effects and invasive treatments may take a toll on your pet's energy and health. Eventually, you may conclude that your efforts to treat a pet's illness are more stressful to the pet than its health condition. In this case, efforts to save a pet's life may actually diminish, rather than enhance, the pet's quality of life.

Make a Decision

It is an ongoing process to assess a pet's quality of life, not a one-time decision. Initially we may try to compensate for any problems we notice. Pain medication may relieve a pet's discomfort and improve its mobility. Dietary alterations may improve appetite and provide better nutrition. We may decide that we are willing to clean up after a pet and carry it wherever it needs to go, for as long as needed. Eventually, such measures will no longer be effective. The process to assess quality of life requires to you determine when this point has been reached and decide what to do next.

You may decide to let nature take its course rather than euthanize your pet. Before you choose this path, understand that you have probably already decided to not let nature take its course, by providing medical treatment, food and shelter. In nature, an animal that becomes too ill to obtain food or protect itself will quickly die.

Nature also does not offer an easy or comfortable death. An animal that cannot breathe easily, cannot eat or digest sufficient food, cannot control its body functions, and can scarcely move is not dying comfortably.

Euthanasia may offer your pet a comfortable, relaxing and easy passing. It is a difficult and painful decision for pet owners to make, but if a pet has poor quality of life, this may be the most unselfish act of love that the owner can offer.



If you are struggling to determine if euthanasia is appropriate for your pet, or if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Source

Adapted from an article by Moira Anderson Allen, M.Ed. published on Pet Loss Support Page.