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Pet Euthanasia

Dealing with death is always traumatic. Pet death, like any other death, can be devastating, especially when individuals must grapple with the decision to use pet euthanasia. Choosing euthanasia can be a final act of kindness for a pet whose illness prevents a desirable quality of life. Despite being a humane act in most cases, choosing euthanasia is a difficult decision.

A good veterinarian understands the pain associated with pet death and euthanasia and can offer advice and support for coping with your dying pet. Our veterinarian is just as sad as you are to euthanize your pet, and the option of euthanasia is only brought up when our vet believes that it is the most humane act for your pet's health. The choice is always yours; at House Paws we believe in the right of owners to make their own decisions regarding their pet's health, and we are here to answer any questions you may have.

Deciding on Pet Euthanasia

Veterinary medicine offers many options to pet owners; even some terminally ill pets can enjoy a reasonable quality of life in their remaining time. However, sometimes nothing is available to help an ill and dying pet.

Quality of life should be the deciding factor for you as you consider euthanizing your pet. Is your pet in severe pain? Does your pet have enough energy to still enjoy activity? On a personal note, are you ready to say goodbye and deal with the death of your pet?

Unless your pet is seriously injured, pet euthanasia need not be a sudden and immediate decision. Take some time to observe your pet and assess his or her overall health. Ask yourself...

- Has your pet experienced any personality or behavior changes?
- Can your pet still walk, or is balance extremely difficult?
- Does your pet still interact with you?
- Has your pet lost sight or hearing?
- How much pain is your pet in?
- Is breathing becoming difficult?
- Is incontinence an issue?
- Is your pet still interested in food, and can your pet keep food down?

Not all of these questions will apply to every pet, and some may be a serious issue for some pets and not others. A small house dog may adapt to blindness, but quality of life may be very affected by blindness for a dog that is used to outdoor activity. Consider your pet's quality of life...are most of your pet's days still good ones? If not, pet euthanasia may be the kindest decision.

You are closest to your pet and best able to judge how your pet is feeling. One cautionary note: unless you're very observant, you may not be aware of how severe a dying pet's pain is. Dogs, cats, birds and other domesticated pets retain enough of their wild instincts to remember that displaying obvious pain in nature is dangerous. Pets often hide pain well and do not vocalize discomfort. Owners may misjudge a pet's pain as simply getting old or sleeping more. A veterinarian may be able to better judge your pet's pain level.

Preparing for Pet Death

Humans live longer than most of their pets. When we welcome a new pet into our lives, we need to accept the inevitability of pet death, including the possibility of pet euthanasia. It may be helpful to make decisions about pet health and euthanasia while your pet is still healthy. Thinking about such issues early in your pet's life may make dealing with your pet's approaching death easier when the time comes.

Finances often need to be considered when dealing with dying pets. Elaborate life-extending treatments and pet surgery can become extremely expensive. As hard as it is to deal with the loss of a pet, it is harder knowing that your money played a role in a euthanasia decision. How much is extending your pet's life worth? Again, deciding ahead of time how much you can afford to spend on veterinary medical expenses can make dealing with death and pet euthanasia easier for you.

Euthanasia

Pet euthanasia is painless for your pet, and this is an important factor to consider when deciding the best course of action for your pet's health. Pet euthanasia uses a mixture of anesthetics designed to cause complete muscle relaxation. The euthanasia solution is typically injected into a vein. The solution completely shuts down all nerve transmissions. The dying pet feels no pain or other sensations. About 10 seconds after the solution is administered, the pet will draw a deep breath and appear to drift into a deep sleep.

Euthanasia may cause some physical effects immediately after pet death that can fool people into thinking their pet is still alive and in pain. These apparent signs of discomfort occur as the animal's nerves release their store of chemicals into surrounding muscles. Some effects of this release include:

- voiding of bowels and bladders as muscles relax
- muscle spasms
- lips pulling back
- a last gasping breath

Pets also usually meet death with their eyes open, which may be disconcerting for some owners.

Choosing In-Home Euthanasia

As a house call business, we provide you with the opportunity to say goodbye to your pet in the comfort and quiet of your own home. This eases your pet's nerves and provides a calming atmosphere for both you and your pet. You will not have to deal with transporting your pet to a clinic, waiting for your appointment time, or spending your last precious moments with your pet in an unfamiliar environment. Many owners wish to be at their pet's side while the euthanasia is being performed; you always have the option to remain in a separate room during the euthanasia if this is what makes you most comfortable. We want you to do what is best for you and your pet.

Grieving a Pet's Death

After pet euthanasia, please do not be afraid to express your emotions. Your pet's death is also distressing to our veterinarian and staff, and we want to support you during this difficult time. Our veterinarian understands what you are going through and may be a source of comfort to you.

Mourning a pet's death is like mourning any human's passing. You may need time to deal with the reality of your pet's absence in your life. Pet death can stir all kinds of emotions, and you may feel guilty for deciding on pet euthanasia. Remember that you make the choice that was best for your pet, and give yourself the time you need to grieve the loss of your friend. Our veterinarian can also suggest some local pet death support groups if you wish to share your experiences about pet death with other grieving pet owners.

This handout was adapted from the article on www.petfocused.com titled "Pet Euthanasia: Dealing with the Death and Dying of a Pet."