



AT HOME PET EUTHANASIA

Dr David Kahl BVSc(hons)
Veterinary Director

When to say goodbye - Older dogs

Knowing when to say goodbye to your beloved pet is a very difficult and very personal decision to make. Despite all the advances in modern veterinary medicine, time will catch us all and our pets will eventually pass away too. Choosing for them to have a dignified passing to prevent suffering is a very difficult but important part of being a responsible pet owner. While some pets will pass quickly and peacefully at home, based on my experience as a veterinarian these are the minority. Some pets that are not euthanised can experience immense suffering and pain at the end of their lifetime, which is why we offer them a dignified and humane passing free of the suffering associated with some natural deaths. Knowing when to make this decision can be difficult and there is no specific formula because each pet and each situation is unique.

I have put together a guide to help consider the quality of life your pet is experiencing based on you and your pet's situation by thinking about the following questions. They are to provide guidance in helping you make the right decision for you and your pet.

Happiness

We all want our pets to live a long and happy life. It is often easier to gauge how happy they are not by just looking at them now but thinking about how they were when they were young. What made them happiest then? Was it chasing balls in the backyard? Was it long runs in the park? Was it a good meal? Or was it simply being with people? Dogs that loved an active lifestyle when they were young will experience a decline in their happiness along with their mobility quicker than those that were happiest with a more sedentary life. Working breed dogs (eg Border Collies) will often have a greater focus on an active lifestyle than a companion breed (eg Cavalier King Charles Spaniel). Once this mobility is a struggle for them this will impact on their ability to perform the activities that they love the most in life.

If they just follow their nose (eg Beagle), not being able to run for long distances may not have much of an impact on their happiness so long as they get plenty of time to enjoy following their noses at the park or in the back yard. Thinking about what your pet loved to do most of all when they were young and whether or not they can still do it and enjoy it will help you assess how much they have to look forward to in life.

Pain

Assessing how much pain your pet is in can be difficult. Some dogs do not show pain unless they are in excruciating pain while others are far more sensitive and let you know the moment they feel any discomfort at all. Pain can be demonstrated in subtle ways, so it is important to keep an eye out for it. You may notice that they shake in their legs when they try to get up, or they may seem reluctant to get up at all unless they absolutely have to. You may also notice that they can't seem to get comfortable and may be pacing around a lot through the night. Panting, yawning, licking and whimpering can all be more obvious signs of pain. If you feel that your pet may be in pain it is best to see your veterinarian to determine if they truly are in pain, what the cause is and if the pain can be relieved.

It is also important to ask two questions about the pain:

1. Can it be controlled with medication
2. Is it a temporary state or will it keep getting worse over time?

If the pain cannot be controlled with medication, this will be reducing your pet's quality of life. If you notice that with medication your pet improves a lot then it is important to continue to monitor their pain levels in case their condition deteriorates. Don't forget that there are many different types of pain relief medications available for your pet so you may need to trial a few different combinations to get the right regime for your pet. Your veterinarian can help you with this so it is important to let them know if it is not working well.

It is also important to consider if the pain your pet feels is likely to be short term (eg they have strained a muscle that will heal with time and pain relief) or if it is likely to continue to get worse over time (eg osteoarthritis in the hips). If it is a condition that will worsen over time it is even more important to ensure that their pain is well controlled as they are going to have an overall decline from now on.

Eating

How your pet behaves at meal time can also give you some clues as to how they are feeling. If they used to eat with gusto and now they aren't interested in their food it may be an indication that they are not feeling well. They may have a condition that they can't tell us about (eg nausea, headache, pain, dental disease, stomach ulcers) that needs to be addressed in order for them to start eating again.

Conversely, if your pet used to be picky with their food and now they seem to always be ravenously hungry (especially if they can't keep weight on) there may also be an underlying medical reason for this. In both of these cases it is best to have your pet assessed by your veterinarian so they can do a physical examination and they may wish to do testing (eg blood test/ultrasound/stool testing etc) to find the cause of your pet's change in appetite. It may be something that can be easily corrected, or it may be a sign that your pet is no longer enjoying a good quality of life due to underlying problems.

Toileting

It is important that your pet is able to maintain good hygiene for their health and for their own mental wellbeing. Pets can often feel embarrassed or ashamed if they wet or soil themselves in an inappropriate location. If your pet is experiencing urinary or faecal incontinence there may be a medical reason for this, so it is best to consult your veterinarian to determine the underlying cause. It may be as simple as some medication to have your pet being back in full control again.

If they are unable to take themselves outside to toilet and they cannot move once they have soiled themselves they are at risk of urine and faecal scalding, infection, fly strike and it will often impact on your bond with your pet. It also impacts upon their quality of life if they cannot toilet themselves properly. Being able to toilet properly is an important part of assessing their quality of life.

Zest for life

This is a little harder to put into words. Sometimes as pets age, their quality of life declines and they just lose their zest for life. They seem to be disinterested in life and their environment and they don't seem happy at all anymore. It is very different from just being old and tired, as it is something that you notice that seems to be a permanent change in their attitude. This is usually something that an attentive owner will pick up on that can be a sign that your pet is no longer enjoying life. If you aren't sure, it may help to discuss this with family, people familiar with your pet or your veterinarian.

Your ability to provide assistance

Is it feasible for you to meet your pet's requirements both now and in the near future? For example if you are at home 24 hours a day, 7 days a week you may be able to assist your pet more if they are having difficulty rising or need assistance. If you work full time or travel away a lot there may not be anyone home to help them if they get into trouble (eg unable to rise after falling in the backyard in the sun). Also if your pet has a degenerative condition and you are planning a lengthy trip away it can be a lot to ask of a carer to monitor your pet's quality of life and make the call to put them to sleep if required. If you do feel that their increasing needs for assistance cannot be met it can be kinder to have them euthanised while they still have a reasonable quality of life rather than waiting for them to get into trouble through misadventure or becoming a difficult responsibility to a carer in your absence.

Who is this decision about?

It is also good to ask yourself if you are making your decision for them or for yourself? We all know that we will miss them dearly once they have passed but we need to put this feeling aside and try to make the decision based on our pet's needs and their quality of life. As a veterinarian one comment I hear from time to time is owners who question whether they kept their pet alive for too long because they were too afraid to let them go. Once the time is right for your pet it is important to remind yourself that you are doing this for them, and find comfort in knowing that as a responsible pet owner you are giving them the gift of not having to suffer at the end of their life.

Assessing Quality of Life

If you aren't sure, your veterinarian is there to help you. Veterinarians are well trained to assess a pet's quality of life and they will ask you a series of questions about your pet's home life while also performing an examination of your pet so that they can ascertain how their quality of life is going. It is best to be confident in your decision before electing to have your beloved pet euthanised and having a professional provide their insight can be helpful in feeling confident that you are making the right choice for your pet to prevent them from suffering at the end of their life.

In summary it is a very personal and individual decision to make so, as the pet's owner, it is up to you to decide when is the right time. It is often a very difficult decision to make but it is an important one to prevent unnecessary suffering at the end of your pet's life. After all, we all want our pets to live the best and happiest life they can and sometimes we have to put their comfort before our own personal wants.

Hopefully this article has helped you think about a few aspects of your pet's life and has hopefully made the decision making process that little bit easier during such a difficult time.