



AT HOME PET EUTHANASIA

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When to say goodbye - pets with medical conditions

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, some pets may have medical conditions that either cannot be fixed or treatment is not a viable option for whatever reason. 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.

Having a pet with a severe medical condition may add complexity to the decision making process. Some pets may be born with congenital problems or they may acquire medical conditions over time or through life events. Sometimes owners can feel guilt over the medical condition of their pet, and this makes the decision to have your pet euthanised far more difficult. If you are feeling this way, you may benefit from discussing your pet's health with someone familiar to your pet who does not have the same emotional attachment or you can seek a professional opinion from your vet. If you are seeing your vet it is always good to have some specific questions to ask and don't ever feel shy about asking whether they feel your pet is still able to enjoy a reasonable quality. They will always do their best to provide their professional opinion to help you through this decision.

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 which you may wish to ask your vet as well. These questions are quite broad and they are only to provide guidance in helping you make the right decision for you and your pet. They are general questions only just to help you consider various aspects of your pet's condition, as each pet is unique and there are a myriad of medical conditions that can impact on a pet's quality of life.

Do they suffer from their medical condition?

Firstly it is very important to establish whether your pet suffers from their condition now or will they likely suffer in the future. Some medical conditions can be painful (eg some cancers/tumours, fractured bones, glaucoma to name a few), others may make them uncomfortable (eg severe skin disease, uncontrollable fear and anxiety) or they may feel lethargic or unwell (eg liver/kidney disease, diabetes, severe heart disease etc) or some conditions may not have any associated suffering at all.

Our pets can't always tell us how they feel so it is important to take note of subtle changes in their demeanour. Regularly assess their energy levels, eating habits, excitement levels for things such as play time and walks to give you an indication of how they feel. If you notice that your pet seems to be progressively lethargic you may wish to have their condition assessed by your vet to ask why they are likely to be feeling flat and discuss the impact it may be having on their quality of life.

Is their medical condition treatable or manageable?

Some medical conditions are temporary and can be cured either with medical or surgical intervention or even just with time. Other conditions may not be able to be cured, but can be managed to ensure your pet still has a good quality of life. Despite the wonderful advances in veterinary care, there are still some conditions that cannot be cured or you may choose to not proceed with further treatment for a variety of reasons. These different scenarios will have different implications on your pet. For example if your pet has a painful soft tissue injury but it will heal well with time, just managing their pain with analgesia may be all they need to get them through. Whereas if they have a painful bone cancer then analgesia alone will not be a long term solution to ensuring they have a good quality of life.

In younger pets with congenital abnormalities, it is important to consider whether their condition is able to be permanently corrected or managed for the rest of their life. The level of ongoing care and management required will also need to be considered. If your pet may go on to lead a happy life with extra care that you can provide then that will be a better scenario. However if your pet will never be able to lead a normal or engaging life due to their condition, or if you are not in a position to provide the extra care for their needs this may be more difficult. In this case it may be kinder to decide to have them euthanised so they don't have to have a life of difficulty and poor quality of life.

Do they have a defined prognosis and life expectancy?

Some medical conditions may have a good prognosis and may be easily cured or managed as discussed earlier, whereas others may carry a terminal prognosis. If their medical condition has a terminal or grave prognosis it can be helpful to know what timeframe most pets with this condition can usually continue to maintain a good quality of life. Medical conditions that deteriorate slowly may give you an opportunity to trial some medical options to improve their quality of life in the time that they have left. If they are already unwell and they are likely to succumb to their medical condition imminently then it may be kinder to euthanise them before they begin to suffer any further. Your vet is a very helpful resource in these circumstances so don't forget to ask for their professional opinion if you aren't sure what to do.

If they succumb to their condition, will they suffer?

Different medical conditions may have different effects on your pet as they deteriorate and pass away. Some medical conditions may cause sudden death where your pet does not suffer at all, however these are rare. This is something to consider though, as if your pet is unlikely to suffer when they pass due to the nature of the disease or condition then you may elect to not euthanise them at all. If you are considering this option it is best to have this confirmed by a vet to make sure you are doing the right thing by your pet and have a backup plan just in case.

In the majority of conditions though, the deterioration before passing away can be very unpleasant and distressing for both your pet and anyone who is with them. This is why it is best to ensure they aren't left to suffer at the end and why booking a euthanasia prior to them deteriorating can alleviate the suffering associated with some natural deaths.

Are you able to provide the care now and when it gets bad?

Some medical conditions do not require much intervention at all, other conditions will require you to rearrange your whole life around your pet in order to be able to provide the level of care they require. If your pet needs someone at home 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to care for them it may not be feasible for those who need to work. Or they may require regular care that is interfering with your bond with your pet (eg having to give insulin injections or a tablet every 12 hours to a cat that is difficult to handle). It is also important to look at the financial burden of managing medical conditions and whether this is feasible for you and your family. For example a pet that has been run over and has severe wounds may require an initial outlay for X-rays and surgery, but then it may continue to need regular rechecks and bandaging with medications for

quite some time afterwards that can add up. Most vets will have finance options, but you still need to be able to make the right decision with all factors considered. If your pet has a condition that requires significant ongoing costs you may wish to discuss this with your vet from the outset to make sure you are able to make this financial commitment without becoming overburdened.

If your pet has a slowly progressive condition, you may wish to consider what you will do if they take a turn for the worst at an inconvenient time. Will you be able to get them to an after hours facility if they require an out of hours euthanasia? Fortunately we have access to wonderful 24 hour vet care here on the Sunshine Coast, but the after hours centres require you to bring your pet to them. If you may not be able to transport your pet during an out of hours emergency you may need to consider have a planned euthanasia before their condition becomes a stressful emergency.

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. As the pet's owner, it is up to you to decide when the time is right. 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. Hopefully this article has helped you think about a few aspects of your pet's condition and has made the decision making process that little bit easier during such a difficult time.