

## End of Life Decisions and Euthanasia

Euthanasia, death and the difficult decisions that surround the “when” and “where” and “how” around that final act are so important and so difficult and yet an inevitable part of sharing your life with a pet. The emotions that we experience before, during and after this time can be completely overwhelming. We have put together a document that helps walk you through some of the important aspects of these decisions.

### **The Difficult Decision**

*Is it a quality-of-life concern?* As our pets age, it is important to start to understand what “Quality of Life” means. Not every sign of ageing is a quality-of-life concern, and not every quality-of-life concern is a sign of ageing. Some concerns that are very profound and worrisome to pet owners are actually very treatable and manageable. Other signs that may be subtle and less alarming to a pet owner may be a significant quality of life concern. Animals hide many of their problems by nature. It is extremely important to have your pet examined regularly by your veterinary team. We can help you sort through these difficult decisions.

*Is it fair to put my pet through tests and treatments?* Another issue that we find many of our clients struggle with is the concern about how the tests and treatments will affect their pets. Many pet owners are very anxious and fearful to put their pets through testing and treatments for fear that that will cause the pet pain and anxiety. This is another time when it's important to rely on the experience of your veterinarian and veterinary team. We can help you understand how we can help your pet through these procedures comfortably, and weigh the pros and cons of proceeding.

*How much will this all cost?* It is also important to discuss the stress around expressing financial concerns. The reality is that many tests and procedures can be costly, and sometimes multiple tests may be needed to work towards a diagnosis. Cost is a part of the decision process that should be discussed openly and without shame. Sometimes it's not even about the actual cost, but about the cost: benefit ratio and the value behind that cost. What is the likelihood that this test will reveal a result that will change our treatment plan, our patient's outcome or our decision to euthanize?

***There are many intricate puzzle pieces that we need to put together when it comes to discussing end of life decisions. We have to balance age, pet temperament, type of disease, prognosis, concurrent conditions, quality of life, invasiveness of testing, budget, treatment options, ability to give treatments at home, pets willingness to take treatments and palliative care options.***

**EXAMPLE #1:** *Let's look at an example that we frequently see in practice. A 17-year-old male cat comes in for euthanasia. He has not been to a vet for a couple of years. He used to be a big healthy boy, and now he is "skin and bones". He paces and meows through the house all night. The owners fear he is dying and in pain and don't want him to suffer. On examination, we hear a fast heart rate and a heart murmur. He has a small mass on his neck. Sounds bad right? We discuss options with the owner and they agree to do some diagnostic workup. They are very concerned about the stress that taking a blood sample will cause their cat, and don't want to cause him pain. We agree on a plan and take a small amount of blood from his back leg, while he is wrapped in a warm towel eating yummy canned food. We run some blood and find out that he has a disease called hyperthyroidism. This is a very treatable disease. The owners give him medication twice daily, hidden in his food. Within three weeks he is gaining weight back, and is no longer pacing and meowing at night. This disease does not shorten his lifespan. We can even get a little creative with this situation depending on the kitty. If blood collection did cause him a lot of stress, we could send him home with some sedatives for his owners to give, and bring him back more relaxed another day. If he didn't take his daily hyperthyroid medications well, we could discuss other methods to treat hyperthyroidism. For example, a special diet, a radioactive iodine injection or medication that can be administered by spreading cream on his ear.*

**EXAMPLE #2:** *Let's look at another common example. A 10-year-old Labrador Retriever comes in for a check-up. Her owners report that they aren't too concerned because she has been doing well, but she has a new cough and her appetite is a little bit decreased. We see from her records that she has lost 10 lbs since her visit last year. Her respiratory rate and her heart rate are quite high, and her gums are very pale. The owners agree to proceed with some additional testing. On bloodwork we find that she is very anemic and has markedly elevated liver enzymes on her bloodwork. An ultrasound reveals that she has a large liver tumour and she is bleeding internally. The owners really struggle to make a decision as to whether they should euthanize because prior to her visit they did not think she was that sick. However, when we work through the quality-of-life checklist with them, the owners realized that she has declined more than they originally understood, and decided that the most humane thing is to continue with euthanasia.*

Please check out this link to our website. Here you will find resources for assessing pain and quality of life for your pet:

Quality of Life Checklist:

<https://gatewaypethospital.com/files/2021/11/Quality-of-Life-Checklist.pdf>

Quality of Life Scale (HHHHMM scale):

<https://gatewaypethospital.com/files/2021/11/HHHHMM-Scale.pdf>

Common Signs of Pain in Your Pet:

<https://gatewaypethospital.com/files/2021/11/Common-signs-of-pain-in-your-pet.jpg>

Canine Pain Scale:

<https://gatewaypethospital.com/files/2021/11/Canine-pain-scale.png>

Feline Grimace Scale:

<https://gatewaypethospital.com/files/2021/11/Feline-Grimace-Scale-fact-sheet.pdf>

## **Euthanasia Planning:**

It is a good idea to think about the euthanasia and aftercare options prior to the date of the actual euthanasia. It can help to relieve some stress to have made decisions about aftercare prior to the euthanasia. Most families choose to have their pet cremated after euthanasia. Please refer to the below document for more information on cremation services and other options.

Pre-planning and Pet Aftercare Support Document from Gateway Crematorium (unrelated to Gateway Pet Hospital):

<https://gatewaypethospital.com/files/2021/11/Pre-Planning-1-and-Pet-Aftercare.pdf>

Many families also like to choose products to help memorialize their pet. These products include clay paw prints, jewellery, urns or stones. See the link below to more information

Link to memorial products:

<https://www.gatewaypetmemorial.com/memorial-products-ontario/>

Understandably, some families are not comfortable making these decisions in advance. We can discuss these options at the time of the euthanasia also. We offer an online portal that allows pet owners to go online and choose their urn or memorial products in the days following the euthanasia.

## **The Euthanasia**

When the time comes, and the decision has been made to proceed with euthanasia, your veterinary team will be here to help guide you through this experience also. By now, everyone is comfortable moving forward with euthanasia and we will have decided that it is the most ethical and humane decision for the pet under the current circumstances. Here are some important considerations surrounding how we will move forward:

1. WHERE:

- a. In the veterinary clinic: At Gateway Pet Hospital, we take care to ensure you and your pet are comfortable during this time. We set up a comfy bed for your pet, on a table or on the floor. We have soft lighting, LED candles and natural music. We have big mats on the floor for the humans too. We dim the lights in the entire hospital, and light a candle in the front in honour of your pet. We try to make the experience feel as non-clinical as possible.
- b. At home: Some families prefer to explore the option to have the euthanasia done at home. Home euthanasia options are available. Although we usually offer home euthanasia ourselves, we have temporarily had to pause this service during the pandemic. However, there are several mobile veterinarians that continue to offer this service.

2. WHEN: In some cases, when a pet is in distress, we don't have the ability to choose the time of the euthanasia. However, often we have some flexibility. It is ideal to choose a time when everyone who wants to be present is available and have no other commitments afterwards. The end of the day is a good time for some families to accommodate this. Others prefer to spend the night with their pet, and come in for the euthanasia first thing in the morning. We never want families to feel rushed during a euthanasia. Often, pet owners like to have the ability to take a day or two off work or other responsibilities afterwards.

3. WHO: Whether or not a family member wants to be present during a euthanasia is a very personal choice. There are lots of variations here. Some family members choose not to be present and say their goodbyes at home prior to the appointment. Others come, but stay for only the sedation and leave prior to the euthanasia. Many stay throughout the entire appointment and may even linger to say their goodbyes afterwards. It is ideal to have at least one other person for moral support, in the form of a friend or family member, when coming to the clinic for this appointment. Sometimes friends or family members come to the appointment to be a driver and offer support, but wait in the waiting room or the car. Whether to have children present for the euthanasia is also a difficult decision and depends a lot on their age and personalities. Often, young children say their goodbyes at home, and parents are free to focus on the pet during the procedure but this is not the best choice for all families. It is important to note that during the Covid-19 pandemic, we do limit the number of loved ones attending the euthanasia to two.

4. HOW: It is important for pet owners to understand how the euthanasia appointment will proceed before they arrive. It helps to relieve stress and anxiety when families know what to expect on this difficult day. Not every clinic has the same routine so it is important to talk with your veterinary team about what to expect. At Gateway Pet Hospital, we do our best to make the appointment as comfortable as possible for everyone. We move through the steps at whatever pace the family is comfortable with.

- a. Sedation prior to the appointment: Often we will send home anxiety medications or sedatives that the pet can be given prior to coming to the appointment.
- b. Keeping anxiety low: On arrival, we administer a strong sedative by injection. This is generally very low stress, and we administer the injection quickly while the pet is eating a yummy treat or cuddling with a family member. This sedation is heavy, and within 5-10 minutes, the pet is extremely relaxed.
- c. The environment: As previously mentioned, we play soft music, and have pillows, soft mats and bedding to ensure everyone's comfort. We have a doorbell that rings to your veterinarian at any time.
- d. Placing an IV catheter: Once the animal is heavily sedated, we may place an IV catheter. This can be done in the room with the family, or the pet can be taken to the back to have the IV placed if the family prefers. This step is not always necessary and the catheter type used may vary depending on the patient and the veterinarian involved in the procedure.
- e. Taking our time: Once the catheter is in place, the family can take whatever time that they need to say their goodbyes. Some prefer to take some extra time here; other families prefer to proceed without delay.
- f. The euthanasia: The doctor will inject a drug into the IV line. There is no pain associated with this injection. The injection will induce unconsciousness within a few seconds of injection, and the pet will pass away peacefully. The doctor will listen to the pet's heart with a stethoscope, and let the family know when the animal has passed away. Rarely, the pet may take one or several reflex breaths after they have passed away. The family is able to sit with the pet for as little time or as much time as they need after the pet has passed away.

Sometimes the pain of these last moments is so great that it leads to depression and/or anxiety. Many people, in their grief, even express that they do not want to experience pet ownership again in the future because they cannot go through the pain of losing a pet again. There are many excellent resources that pet owners can access to help them through this difficult time, including but not limited to their veterinary team.

Understanding Grief and Link to Pet Loss Grief Support

<https://gatewaypethospital.com/files/2021/11/Understanding-Grief.pdf>

Coping with Loss of a Pet

<https://gatewaypethospital.com/files/2021/11/Coping-1-with-the-loss-of-a-companion-animal.pdf>

Please do not hesitate to reach out to the Gateway Pet Hospital team with any questions or concerns. Above all, remember that you are not alone in this journey. We are here to help and offer our support in whatever ways we can.