



## **COPING WITH PET EUTHANASIA**

### **Introduction**

This Support Sheet has been written to help those who are facing the loss of a beloved pet to be as best prepared as possible. Although we know that our pet's life expectancy is generally much shorter than our own, as our companion animal starts to grow old, or struggles through terminal illness, understandably we begin to fear the end. As the pet's carer, we naturally feel the responsibility for their welfare and comfort, throughout their life and increasingly so as they draw towards the close of their time. Of course, we hope for a peaceful and easy ending for our beloved pets, and fortunately with veterinary intervention this is usually possible.

However, even though we know that euthanasia is a way of preventing unnecessary suffering for an animal, it is difficult to come to terms with the fact of making such a decision when it comes to our own much loved pet. It is worth remembering that 'euthanasia' actually means 'easy death' – it may help to think about euthanasia as the final act of kindness you can offer your pet in relieving them of their suffering.

### **Making the decision**

Euthanasia is something that is decided by the owner, in consultation with the vet, and it is not a decision that anyone else can make. As a caring owner, you will know your pet very well, and will begin to realise when the animal 'has had enough'. However, during this time it's vitally important to keep in regular contact with your vet, who can guide you as to the right time for euthanasia.

### **Things to consider**

The vet will usually ask you whether you wish to be present when euthanasia is administered. There is no hard and fast rule, as it's entirely up to how you feel you will cope. If you know that you will be so distraught that it will affect your pet, then you may decide it is better to wait outside and then go in afterwards to say your final goodbye. Some vets are able to come to the house to administer euthanasia whilst others prefer the pet to be brought to the surgery. Again this needs to be discussed in advance if possible, bearing in mind that the cost may reflect the vet coming to your home.

Either way, it's important to allow all members of the family to have the opportunity to say goodbye to the pet beforehand. When there are children in the family, it is best to be honest with them about what is happening so that they are not shocked afterwards to find that their little friend is no longer there. Phrases such as 'being put to sleep' can be disturbing for young children, who may later worry that going to sleep means never waking up again. A simple explanation about the cycle of life and death may help. The ***EASE Children's Pet Bereavement activity book*** has been carefully written to help children through the process of pet loss, and this is available as a free download from the EASE website.

### **Euthanasia at home**

Having arranged a time for the vet to come to your home (and bear in mind the vet may bring along a veterinary nurse) you may wish to spend time beforehand with your pet, keeping them comfortable and letting them know how much they are loved. It will help both you and your pet if you can stay calm, keeping the room quiet and undisturbed, perhaps with peaceful music playing gently in the background.

### **Euthanasia at the vet's practice**

You may find it helpful to take someone with you for support and who could drive you home afterwards. It is very natural to be upset, and having someone who understands what you are going through will help. Vets are very aware of the shock and grief that pet owners go through, and are used to people being upset when their pet dies, so you do not need to feel awkward about showing your feelings. It is totally understood that this is a very difficult time.

## **PRACTICAL ASPECTS**

*This section includes some of the practicalities about euthanasia, in the hope that it will help you to be more prepared in extending this important final act of kindness.*

### **What to expect**

You will probably be asked to read and sign a consent form, which can be distressing but is a necessary formality.

If you have decided to stay with your pet during euthanasia, you can ask the vet to explain what will happen so that you are as well prepared as possible. Vets usually give an injection, so the vet or nurse will probably need to shave a little fur for this (you may want to ask your vet if it's possible to apply some numbing cream to go on the pet's leg beforehand to numb the sensation of the needle). The injection quickly causes unconsciousness and the heart to stop beating. As the pet slips away there may be reflex actions such as a little muscle twitching or even a gasp. It is helpful to have a towel or cloth to wrap around your pet, as there is often some soiling after death. Afterwards the eyes may remain open, but again this is normal.

### **Payment**

It's difficult to have to consider this at such a time, but payment may be expected straightaway, although some practices send an invoice later to their regular clients.

### **How you may feel**

Even when a pet's death is expected, you may feel shocked and upset once it has happened. Therefore it is important to allow yourself some quiet time afterwards. The sudden unexpected death of a pet can be particularly traumatic, and therefore it is really important to make sure that there is time to recover from the shock this may bring before trying to resume your normal activities.

### **Deciding what to do afterwards**

Whenever possible it is best to decide in advance what you wish to do with your pet's remains. The EASE Support Sheet '*A practical guide to after-death services*' can help you think about this important aspect.

In conclusion, even when a pet's death is expected, you may feel shocked and upset once it has happened. Therefore it's wise to allow yourself some quiet time afterwards. The sudden unexpected death of a pet can be particularly traumatic, and therefore it's important to make sure that there's time to recover from the shock that this may bring before trying to resume your normal activities.



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