

Euthanasia and Pet Loss Support

Euthanasia: When is it Time?

The decision regarding the euthanasia of a beloved pet may be the most difficult decision one makes in one's entire life; obviously, the consequences are irrevocable. Whatever the decision is, it should be one that you can always look back upon and know that the best decision was made and that you would make the same decision over again in the same situation.



So how do you know if it is time? There are several criteria used in evaluating life quality and you should consider them carefully.

- Is your pet eating? Basically, quality life involves eating or at least interest in food. An animal that is hungry has vitality that must be considered, though this is not the only consideration.
- Is your pet comfortable? The pet should be free of debilitating pains, cramps, aches or even the psychological pain that comes from the development of incontinence in an animal who has been housebroken for an entire life.
- Does the pet still enjoy favorite activities? The elderly pet does not necessarily need to continue chasing balls or jumping after discs but he should enjoy sleeping comfortably, favorite resting spots, the company of family, etc. You know your pet better than any one and only you can truly answer these questions.

Dr. Alice Villalobos, the veterinarian who started [Pawspice](#), a quality of life program for terminal pets, has published a scoring system for life quality called The HHHHHMM scale. The letters stand for: Hurt, Hunger, Hydration, Hygiene, Happiness, Mobility, and More Good Days than Bad.

Quality of Life Scale: The HHHHHMM Scale	
Pet caregivers can use this Quality of Life Scale to determine the success of pawspice care. Score patients using a scale of 1 to 10.	
Score	Criterion
1-10	HURT - Adequate pain control, including breathing ability, is first and foremost on the scale. Is the pet's pain successfully managed? Is oxygen necessary?
1-10	HUNGER - Is the pet eating enough? Does hand feeding help? Does the patient require a feeding tube?
1-10	HYDRATION - Is the patient dehydrated? For patients not

	drinking enough, use subcutaneous fluids once or twice daily to supplement fluid intake.
1-10	HYGIENE - The patient should be brushed and cleaned, particularly after elimination. Avoid pressure sores and keep all wounds clean.
1-10	HAPPINESS - Does the pet express joy and interest? Is the pet responsive to things around him or her (family, toys, etc.)? Is the pet depressed, lonely, anxious, bored or afraid? Can the pet's bed be close to the family activities and not be isolated?
1-10	MOBILITY - Can the patient get up without assistance? Does the pet need human or mechanical help (e.g., a cart)? Does the pet feel like going for a walk? Is the pet having seizures or stumbling? (Some caregivers feel euthanasia is preferable to amputation, yet an animal who has limited mobility but is still alert and responsive can have a good quality of life as long as caregivers are committed to helping the pet.)
1-10	MORE GOOD DAYS THAN BAD - When bad days outnumber good days, quality of life might be compromised. When a healthy human-animal bond is no longer possible, the caregiver must be made aware the end is near. The decision needs to be made if the pet is suffering. If death comes peacefully and painlessly, that is okay.
*TOTAL	*A total over 35 points represents acceptable life quality

Adapted by Villalobos, A.E., Quality of Life Scale Helps Make Final Call, VPN, 09/2004, for Canine and Feline Geriatric Oncology Honoring the Human-Animal Bond, by Blackwell Publishing, Table 10.1, released 2006.

If you are considering euthanasia, discuss your pet's condition with us prior to making a decision or even coming in for an appointment. There is a possibility, the condition can be treated and euthanasia may not be the only option! Sometimes very simple problems can seem severe so be sure to let us examine your pet before you even consider euthanasia. The mental process of making the euthanasia decision is heart breaking and you do not want to have to undergo this process twice but, on the other hand, you do not want to euthanize a pet with a treatable disease. Many times people come in for their euthanasia appointment having already made their decision when, in fact, their pet has a reversible problem.

One of the first questions we ask when approached by an owner considering euthanasia is "If you were the same age as your pet, would you trade places if you were the same age and had the same condition?" When the answer is no, it is time to let your pet go.

Should You be Present?

Again, this is a personal decision. On one hand, you probably do not want your pet to be alone with strangers in the final moments but on the other hand you may not be up to watching your pet's death. Every owner wants to think of euthanasia as a gentle slipping into death, much like falling asleep. At Los Robles Animal Hospital we do our best to make your pet's passing gentle, quiet and peaceful. We don't want the owner or the patient to be frightened and we allow ample time for saying good bye.

How is the Procedure Performed?

Appropriate forms must be signed in order for the procedure to take place.

In some cases, an intravenous catheter may be placed to facilitate a smooth procedure. The owner is allowed to spend some last time alone with the pet if desired.

The procedure itself is very fast. First a heavy sedative is given and the pet is allowed time to fall asleep with the owner present. Once the owner is ready the euthanasia solution is delivered and death comes peacefully in a matter of seconds. The owner is allowed to remain with the pet for final private goodbyes. At the end of this time, after the last goodbyes and caresses are completed, the owner simply exits the room when ready and the hospital staff takes over.

Let us know in advance if you would like a lock of hair, the collar or a paw print as a keepsake.

What Happens to my Pet Afterwards?

We offer several options:

- 1) Burial at home. If you choose this option we will place your pet in a biodegradable "pet napper" before you take him or her home for burial.
- 2) Communal Cremation or Private Cremation with ashes returned. You can also choose a special urn if desired.
- 3) Private burial at a pet cemetery.

If your pet is euthanized and the cause for his or her problem is unknown, an autopsy (called necropsy in veterinary medicine) is available and is compatible with any of the options listed above. There are different levels of detail for this procedure. If you have unanswered questions or a legal interest in these results, please discuss the details with your veterinarian.

Grieving

Grief is a natural part of loss and has predictable stages. Do not feel ashamed or embarrassed about grieving for the loss of an animal. Our pets are beloved family members and their loss is keenly felt. Still, it is important to realize that death is a natural end to life and that love will always continue. There are many resources available to assist in your grieving process.



The UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine has a Pet Loss Support Program that offers toll-free telephone support to callers. The hours are Monday through Friday, from 6:30 am to 9:30 pm Pacific Standard Time.
1-800-565-1526

In addition, the following on-line areas may be helpful:

www.petloss.com
www.pet-loss.net
www.aplb.org

Helpful books are available as well:

Final Farewell: Preparing For and Mourning the Loss of Your Pet
By Marty Tousley and Katherine Heurman. 85 pages; illustrated. Our Pals Publishing Co, 3629 N 40th Ave. Phoenix AZ 85019. 1997

Healing the Pain of Pet Loss: Letters in Memorium
edited by Kymberly Smith, The Charles Press.

Absent Friend: Coping with the Loss of a Treasured Friend
by Laura and Martyn Lee, pub. by Henston Press, High Wycombe, Bucks, England, 1992.

Courtesy of Veterinary Partner. www.veterinarypartner.com

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