

Less stress for you and your pet



## Euthanasia: Knowing When

January 02, 2001

Written by: Lisa C. Beagan, DVM

As much as you try to extend your pet's life through first-rate medical care, there comes a time when euthanasia is the most caring gift left to give your animal companion.

---

*Approximately 70 percent of owners opt for euthanasia when the pet is suffering from an ailment that significantly compromises its quality of life.*

---

Choosing to put your pet down is an incredibly difficult and emotionally grueling decision to make, but it's often more humane than letting the animal live on in misery. Approximately 70 percent of owners opt for euthanasia when the pet is suffering from an ailment that significantly compromises its quality of life.

If your pet is gravely ill or has been so severely injured that the prospect of recovery is slim, and euthanasia looks like the kindest option, then the next big question becomes how to tell when it's time to put the animal down.

Your veterinarian can help you with the decision, but most vets will leave the choice of timing up to you. When my clients ask me, "How will I know when it's time?" I always tell them that they will get cues from their pet, if they look their friend in the eyes and try to read what they are thinking. Most clients will innately know when it is time. If a client does not think it is time, then it usually isn't.

Does this all sound like touchy-feely mumbo-jumbo to you? Maybe you're looking for a hard-and-fast answer about when euthanasia is appropriate? Unfortunately, there is none—but there are parameters for assessing the quality of an animal's life. If you're worried that you won't instinctively be able to figure out when the time is right, review the following inventory of questions to help you get a better sense.

1. Does your pet maintain his usual routine—getting up, going outside, eating, sleeping, and playing, as it has throughout his life? Do you still get greeted at the door with a big, sloppy kiss hello? Animals are creatures of habit. **When the daily routine is lost, consider that a sign that life just isn't the same for your pet.**

2. Is your pet in pain? If so, **can the pain be treated with medication, or is there nothing that will resolve it?** If the answer is the latter, then it might be more humane to end your pet's suffering.

3. In addition to other debilitating problems, does your pet suffer from incontinence? If your older pet has become incontinent after a life of perfectly house-trained behavior, he probably realizes that he is doing something he has been taught not to do, and thus suffers from a loss of dignity. He senses that you are upset by the accidents and can do nothing to stop the problem. If every effort has been made to diagnose and treat the problem and the incontinence remains, **take a good look at the pet's quality of life.**

---

*Ultimately, the real question is whether you are keeping your pet alive for yourself or for the pet.*

---

4. Does your pet's condition require extraordinary levels of care? If the treatment is **extremely expensive**, consider whether the disease is one that will be treatable. Chronic and progressive diseases can be taxing, physically, emotionally and financially.

Ultimately, the real question is whether you are **keeping your pet alive for yourself or for the pet**. It is always difficult to make the decision to euthanize, but if your pet is suffering, unable to live the life he's always lived, or requires a treatment regimen that is not only expensive, but also won't resolve the disease, then a humane death may be the right choice.

**For more information:**

To learn about the actual procedure of euthanasia, read the VetCentric magazine article, "Euthanasia: What to Expect When Your Pet's Time Has Come."

"Letting go" can be a wrenching experience for pet owners. For information on pet grief counseling, read these VetCentric articles: "Dealing With the Death of a Pet, Part 1: Pet Cemetery" and "Dealing with the Death of a Pet, Part 2: Grief Counseling." Both these articles contain links to pet grief counseling services.