

Saying Goodbye—When You Have to Make the Decision to Euthanize Your Beloved Pet

I've lived with several pets in my lifetime, but I never had to make the decision to end the life of my beloved pet until recently. Euthanasia is derived from the Greek language, meaning "good death" or "easy death". The decision to end the life of my beloved Jack, to spare him from ongoing pain and suffering, was the most gut-wrenching decision I have had to make for him. But it was a decision made because of love and mercy.

It may be necessary to consider having your pet euthanized when you observe that your beloved pet's quality of life has diminished significantly for any number of reasons, including that he/she is experiencing chronic pain that cannot be relieved; frequently vomits or has diarrhea that causes dehydration and/or weight loss; stops eating and only eats if force fed; or is experiencing chronic labored breathing or coughing. Consultation with your veterinarian may help with your difficult decision making. It may also be helpful to ask a trusted friend or family-member, who is not as emotionally involved, to assess your beloved pet's condition with you.

If such a day comes when you decide you should euthanize your pet, these are some issues you should first address:

- 1) Whether to have the procedure at the veterinarian's office or at home. For many pets, a trip to the veterinary office is stressful and your pet may need a sedative before or during the procedure.
- 2) Who, if anyone in the family, will be present at the end. Some people choose to be with their pet and others do not. We are not comfortable with death and would rather not witness the death of our beloved pet. But if you believe you will regret not staying with your beloved pet at the last moments, then I highly recommend you stay with your pet.
- 3) The veterinarian will explain the procedure, but do not hesitate to ask for clarification. You can also ask the veterinarian office for some private time with your pet before and after the procedure.
- 4) Determine how you will get home if the procedure is done at the veterinarian's office. You may be very emotional and driving home may be difficult.
- 5) Lastly, decide what you want to do with your pet's remains. Cremation is the more popular choice and you can choose whether to have the ashes returned to you. Burial is another option, in the yard or at a pet cemetery.

The procedure of euthanasia by injection is quick and painless for your pet. The veterinarian may place an intravenous (IV) catheter in the vein before the final injection. The catheter will reduce the risk that the vein will rupture as the final solution is injected and will help the procedure go more smoothly. Usually within six to twelve seconds after the solution is injected, your pet will lapse into what looks like a deep sleep and death will occur within a few minutes or less. Your pet may show some muscle twitching and intermittent breathing before the end. Sometimes eyelids will not close and your pet may also release his or her bladder or bowels. These events are normal and should not be cause for alarm. Your veterinarian will use a stethoscope to confirm that your pet's heart has stopped.

Grieving is a normal process after the loss of your beloved pet, and it is very helpful to have people around you who understand what you are experiencing. People who have not experienced death of a loved one, human or pet, may not be able to connect with what you are experiencing. Do not feel ashamed or embarrassed about expressing your grief.

My last day with Jack was in the emergency room. The veterinarian and her staff were compassionate, patient and professional as they explained the procedure and gave me time with Jack to accept his fate. I held him on my lap when he took his last breath. Even though their time with us is so short, I still choose to share my home and heart with them.

To all those who may have to make the ultimate decision to give your beloved pet an “easy death”:

The Last Battle

If it should be that I grow frail and weak
And pain should keep me from my sleep,
Then will you do what must be done,
For this -- the last battle -- can't be won.
You will be sad I understand,
But don't let grief then stay your hand,
For on this day, more than the rest,
Your love and friendship must stand the test.
We have had so many happy years,
Through happiness, laughter, sadness and tears.
You wouldn't want me to suffer so.
When the time comes, please, let me go.
Take me to where to my needs they'll tend,
Only stay with me until the end
And hold me firm and speak to me
Until my eyes no longer see.
I know in time you will agree
It is a kindness you do to me.
Although my tail its last has waved,
From pain and suffering I have been saved.
Don't grieve that it must be you
Who has to decide this thing to do.
We've been so close -- we two -- these years,
Don't let your heart hold any tears.

--Unknown