



Kingsbrook Animal Hospital

5322 New Design Road, Frederick, MD, 21703

Phone: (301) 631-6900

Website: KingsbrookVet.com

Euthanasia Decisions and Your Cat

Our culture has evolved to embrace the human–animal bond with love and respect. Our cats are members of the family, and many of us describe ourselves as “pet parents.” Because of advances in veterinary medicine and preventive care, as well as the migration of cats from the barnyard catching mice to the bedroom sharing a pillow with us, cats are living longer and in closer relationships with humans than ever before. The longer the relationship, the stronger the bond. The stronger the bond, the more challenging it is to consider the end of a cat’s life, including the difficult decisions around euthanasia. Although it is heart–breaking to think about the fact that our cats’ lives are generally shorter than our own, thinking about a cat’s eventual need for euthanasia and making a plan ahead of time will relieve much of the stress associated with decisions made when the end of life is near.



"Making a plan ahead of time will relieve much of the stress associated with decisions made when the end of life is near."

How will I know when euthanasia is the most appropriate and humane option for my cat?

Open and honest communication with your veterinarian and veterinary healthcare team throughout a cat’s life lays the foundation for effective communication when that cat’s life begins to draw to a close. At some point, most cats will develop a life–limiting disease (such as chronic kidney disease or cancer). As soon as such a diagnosis is made, it is time to begin measuring the cat’s quality of life.

Quality of life is a fairly subjective concept, which is why Dr. Alice Villalobos, a veterinary oncologist, has created a quality–of–life scale to help cat owners assign some objective scores to everyday aspects of their cat’s life (see the handout “Quality of Life at the End of Life for Your Cat”). This quality–of–life scale helps us identify trends over time—specifically, declining quality over days and weeks. Your veterinarian will be better equipped to help you identify the right time for euthanasia if you keep him or her informed about the day–to–day details of your cat’s life at home. Discussion with your veterinarian will clarify any specific medical implications of your cat’s disease that can serve as benchmarks to suggest that euthanasia should be considered.

Quality–of–life–related questions that should be asked and answered as the time for euthanasia approaches include:

- What disease signs and symptoms will I see that will let me know it is time for euthanasia?
- What day–to–day activities will disappear from my pet’s routine?
- How will I measure day–to–day quality of life?
- How often will I measure quality of life?
- How often will I discuss quality–of–life trends with my veterinary healthcare team?

- Which categories on the quality-of-life scale will be the most important for my cat?

My spiritual beliefs prevent me from actively or willingly ending an animal's life. Because I will not consent to euthanasia, how can a discussion of euthanasia benefit my cat and me?

"It is certainly possible to honor spiritual beliefs that prevent euthanasia while still providing and delivering appropriate pain management and comfort care."

In this scenario, speaking with your veterinarian about your cat's approaching end of life is even more important. It is certainly possible to honor spiritual beliefs that prevent euthanasia while still providing and delivering appropriate pain management and comfort care. In this case, your veterinary healthcare team may need to be a bit more involved in measuring quality-of-life trends to prevent your cat from suffering unnecessarily.

Where will euthanasia happen?

Most often, euthanasia is provided at the veterinary practice or in your home. In general, the location can be left to the discretion of the family. If you choose euthanasia at home, your primary care veterinarian may be able to provide that service. If not, there are house-call veterinarians as well as veterinarians who dedicate their entire practice to providing in-home euthanasia services. Veterinary professionals can help you, your family, and your cat to be quite comfortable at this challenging time.

What should I consider or plan for regarding what will happen after my cat's passing?

There are a number of questions that should be asked and answered in preparation for the approaching death of your beloved cat. Some examples include:

- How will my cat's body be handled after death?
- Do I want my cat to be cremated or buried?
- Do I want to keep a memorial, such as a lock of hair or my cat's footprint in clay?
- How will my cat's body be transported after death?
- What should I do if my cat dies on his or her own?

By having a detailed plan in place ahead of time, you may feel a sense of quiet or peace that will allow you to focus on the remaining time you and your cat will share.



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The veterinary healthcare team will be an important partner as you negotiate the difficult days and decisions leading up to your cat's death. It is important to communicate your wishes clearly so that they can be honored appropriately. A bit of planning can make this challenging event a little less painful.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Robin Downing, DVM, CVPP, CCRP, DAAPM

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