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Euthanasia Decisions and Your Dog

Our culture has evolved to embrace the human–animal bond with love and respect. Our dogs 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 dogs from the backyard to the house and even into our bedrooms, dogs 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 dog’s life, including the difficult decisions around euthanasia. Although it is heart–breaking to think about the fact that our dogs’ lives are generally shorter than our own, thinking about your dog’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.

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



Open and honest communication with your veterinarian and veterinary healthcare team throughout a dog’s life lays the foundation for effective communication when that dog’s life begins to draw to a close. At some point, most dogs will develop a life–limiting disease (such as organ failure or cancer). As soon as such a diagnosis is made, it is time to begin measuring the dog’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 dog owners assign some objective scores to everyday aspects of their dog’s life (see the handout “Quality of Life at the End of Life for Your Dog”). 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 dog’s life at home. Discussion with your veterinarian will clarify any specific medical implications of your dog’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 dog?

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 dog and me?

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In this scenario, speaking with your veterinarian about your dog'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 dog 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 dog to be quite comfortable at this challenging time.

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

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

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