



Lake
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The Facts about Pet Euthanasia

Euthanasia... What To Expect
by Dr. T. J. Dunn, Jr.

Every individual pet owner faces the day when they have to decide the ultimate fate of an aging pet. Some may be as insensitive as just dropping off their pet at a veterinarian office with no respect or empathy. Many people do not feel the need to be close to their pet during the euthanasia period. Maybe we humans are so close to our pets that we somehow project our own humanity and mortality into them and we actually see ourselves at our own last moments. Do some pet owners act out how they think they would view their own passing?

Others take more responsibility and treat their pet as if a family member is passing. The love and pride of having this being in their lives have pushed a sense of gratitude that a non-pet lover could ever comprehend. You have to decide what is best for you and your pet. Your pet has been a huge part of your life for a long time and this is not an easy thing for you to do."

Most people really have had no guidelines to follow, had no firm ground on which to stand while partaking in their pet's final time. For those of you who have had no experience with euthanasia of a pet, here are a few guidelines to help you when the time comes to euthanize your pet.

The appointment to pet euthanasia

Explain that you have never had to go through this experience before and would like to know what to expect regarding the euthanasia procedure. You have a right to take your deceased pet home for personal burial. You may also choose to leave your deceased pet with the veterinarian for burial or cremation. Always ask what will be done with your deceased pet after it is "put to sleep"! If you don't, you will always wonder, and your imagination will not be kind to you.

In-home pet euthanasia

To make the moment more comfortable to pet owners, in-house pet euthanasia is possible. However, there are a number of things for you to consider.

1. What will you do with your pet after euthanasia?
2. Will your pet require restraint so that the needle can be carefully placed into a vein? In the animal hospital, the staff is trained in gentle restraint procedures which allows for proper administration of the euthanasia solution.

3. The veterinarian will most likely have to schedule the home visit after regular office hours. Are you willing to pay for an after-hours in-home visit?

4. Do you understand that often, as the pet is euthanized, there will be an emptying of the bowels and bladder? In an animal hospital setting this is not a problem.

5. Understand that in the animal hospital most animals are willing to accept that they are not in their own territory and they become less defensive than they would be in their own home. This realization by the pet actually allows for easier handling of the pet in the hospital than the same handling as taking place in the pet's home.

6. Are you willing to have your pet sedated prior to attempts to place the needle for euthanasia? Sometimes the process goes much more smoothly if sedation is given prior to the visit. Sedation is a good topic to discuss with your veterinarian to lessen any stress on your pet prior to an in-hospital or in-home procedure.

There are veterinarians who have made it a policy never to euthanize a pet outside of the animal hospital setting. They have some very good reasons for this policy. However, if you must have your pet euthanized at home, don't be reluctant to make some phone calls and you will be able to find a veterinarian who will accommodate your wishes.

The Appointment... To Be There or Not To Be There

It is your personal choice whether or not to be present in the exam or surgery room when the veterinarian administers the euthanasia solution. Many people simply cannot bear to see the moment of their special friend's passing. Others wouldn't let a tidal wave interfere with their being present! It really is up to your personal preference. Some people choose to stay in the waiting room during the procedure and then briefly view their pet after it has passed away, maybe then spending a few moments in private with their pet.

If you are not sure just what to do I will offer an observation I have made from feedback from my clients. There are a multitude of pet owners who have regretted NOT being there with their pet when the pet was being euthanized, and their feelings that they may have abandoned their pet at a crucial time has created a certain sense of guilt that simply will not go away. So... think over very carefully how you will feel long after your pet has been "put to sleep". Will you have regrets if you do not stay with your pet?

No one is comfortable with death, especially your veterinarian and animal hospital staff who face death every day. Your discomfort with the event should not govern your decision whether or not to be present with your pet at the time of its passing. Many apprehensive clients, with a slightly surprised look, have queried after the event "Is that it? That was very quick and peaceful. Thank you, Doctor".

You might choose to leave your pet in the car and go in first to see if there will be any delays prior to your scheduled time. As a veterinarian I have never been comfortable seeing a client sitting patiently in the waiting room with their pet for that final appointment. It is perfectly reasonable to ask the receptionist to let you know when the doctor is ready to see your pet... then bring your pet directly into the exam room. You should not have to be isolated in the exam room for a long period of time, either.

If you think your pet would be more comfortable and less apprehensive (not all pets relish coming to the animal hospital!) you may ask the veterinarian to provide your pet with some sedation prior to your visit. This can be administered at home at a directed time interval prior to the appointment or often sedation is given in the animal hospital via a painless injection under the pet's skin. After a short time the pet is relaxed and calm.

In order to administer the euthanasia solution* your veterinarian must gain entry into a vein. The solution is specially made to act quickly and painlessly but it must be administered intravenously. This requires that your pet be calm and confident. If the veterinarian requests your permission to sedate your pet, please understand that the request is made in order to humanely and peacefully accomplish the task at hand. If your pet is uncooperative, defensive, afraid or even fractious, your veterinarian and you will not be able to properly carry out the procedure.

* Most euthanasia solutions are a combination of chemicals whose intent is to effect a quick and painless termination of nerve transmission and to effect complete muscle relaxation. When nerve impulses are not conducted there is no thought, no sensation, no movement. The solution is available only to licensed veterinarians and your veterinarian must possess a special certificate in order to purchase the solution.

The Last Moments

When the veterinarian is ready to administer the euthanasia solution the assistant will help hold your pet and put a slight amount of pressure on a vein, usually in the foreleg. This allows the veterinarian to see the vein better and aids in passing a fine needle into the vein. When it is certain that the needle is within the vein the veterinarian slowly injects the solution. Many pet owners choose to help hold their pet and if possible even have the pet in their arms at the time of euthanasia. Your veterinarian will try to accommodate your wishes, but remember that it is imperative that the solution be injected within the vein for the procedure to unfold properly.

Usually within six to twelve seconds after the solution is injected the pet will take a slightly deeper breath, then grow weak and finally lapse into what looks like a deep sleep. (This state gives rise to the questionable euphemism "to put to sleep".) The pet, although completely unconscious, may continue to take a few more breaths before all movement ceases. I have found that the older and sicker the pet the longer this unconscious breathing state goes on.

Some pet owners will be more comfortable if they do not observe the pet's final moments and would rather be in the waiting room during the injection. Then when their pet has passed away, the owner may wish to be with their pet privately for a few moments. If you do chose to visit with your pet after it has been euthanized, ask your veterinarian to be sure your pet's eyelids are closed; some pet owners have been saddened even further by looking into their deceased pet's eyes.

It is at this point when the veterinarian has completed the procedure where great empathy and support for the pet owner is very important. I generally ask the owner if they would like to spend a few moments alone with the pet. Some people do and some people do not. If the client chooses to take the pet home, by pre-arrangement a container is at the ready to receive the pet.

The veterinarian usually will place the pet into the container and carry the deceased pet out to the car for the owner. If the pet owner chooses to have the pet cremated the veterinarian generally will make the arrangements through a cremation service and notify you when you can expect to have the ashes returned. Generally, pet owners are surprised at the small quantity of ashes that are returned. Remember, most living creatures are about 95% water.

It is perfectly reasonable to ask "How do I know that the ashes that I receive will actually be those of my pet?" Everyone wonders about that. Your veterinarian should be willing to provide you with the name and phone number of the cremation service. Don't be afraid to call up the cremation service and tell them your concerns about your pet. You should get courteous and respectful answers to all your questions and if you don't, let your veterinarian know. In fact it would be a good idea to call the cremation service long before that final day so that the last moments with your pet are as unstressful as possible.

It is not unusual nor unreasonable for pet owners to save a bit of their pet's fur as a physical remembrance of their special friend. Some people want their pet to be buried or cremated with a few photos, or a rose or even a personal letter or poem from the pet owner to their pet. Just remember it is YOUR friend, YOUR pet, that is passing away and you can do anything you wish to ease your transition into the time of separation from that friend.

Suggestion: You may want someone to be with you after the appointment to drive you home. You may be surprised how difficult it can be to concentrate on driving after such an emotional event as what you just experienced.