

We all hope that our beloved pets will pass away peacefully and swiftly, but sadly this is often not the case. The following is a guide to try and help you get through that difficult period when faced with the death of a pet.

Deaths can be either sudden or expected. Sudden deaths - human or pet - are always a dreadful shock. Finding a pet dead, or being told about an unexpected death, often engenders feelings of guilt - "Why wasn't I there?" - as well as "I don't know if he/she suffered." Even when you do know what has happened (usually trauma, such as a road traffic accident), it isn't necessarily any easier to cope with. However many precautions we take and however careful and responsible we are, it isn't always enough as tragedies will occur.

With expected deaths, things may be easier to cope with as you are forewarned. This may still leave you with "anticipatory bereavement", ie: the dread of knowing what is coming, and this may be distressing, potentially ruining what quality time remains of your pet's life.

This leads us to the subject of euthanasia. As loving and responsible pet owners, we know we are likely to have to ask our vet to end the life of our pet peacefully and painlessly. This decision process is not always clear cut or painless for us. Sometimes the decision is urgent and the only humane option is immediate euthanasia, but more often than not we are faced with the decision of knowing when it is the right time.

We all cope in different ways - we may discuss the situation with friends and family or look at information on the internet. Most vets will agree that you will know when the time is right because you know your pet so well - either he/she isn't him/herself or it is obvious that there are more bad days/times than good days/times. The staff at your veterinary practice will be there to guide you and help you. Time and time again we hear stories about how people wish they had had the courage to make that decision rather than leave things a little too long - we never hear people saying they regretted having a terminally ill pet put to sleep too soon.

Another factor to consider is you, the owner. It is not a betrayal to your pet if you have to factor in the practicalities of life and make sure that you don't endanger your own health and well being. If you need to make a decision about the timing of euthanasia because you need someone to drive you to the surgery, or when you can take a few days off work, or when you can't finance further treatment, or when you cannot cope with the prospect of carrying on with a situation that ultimately will end in the pet dying, then that is okay and no one will judge you. It is also okay to make the decision to put your pet to sleep as soon as a serious illness is diagnosed, particularly if you have an elderly pet, rather than face a long period of treatments or surgery.

Things to consider before making an appointment

There are a number of things you will need to consider beforehand, and our staff will try and guide you through this difficult time, for example:

- Do you wish to be present during the process or maybe you may wish to see your pet afterwards? Maybe you would prefer not to see the body at all.
- Do you want to see a particular vet? Would you prefer to be seen in a particular consulting room? Would a home visit be better?
- Do you wish to pay in advance?
- Do you want to leave via a back door and not pass back through the reception area?

There are no right or wrong ways to do things - it is an intensely personal choice and we will try and accommodate your wishes to make the process as easy and dignified as possible in the circumstances. You will be asked to fill in a consent form and whether you want us to arrange a cremation (see later) or take your pet home to bury. Your vet will talk you through the process if you wish.

The euthanasia process

Pets are euthanased ("put to sleep") using a lethal injection (an overdose of an irreversible anaesthetic). Sometimes pets are sedated first and sometimes a cannula is placed into a vein first. Usually the vet will carefully inject the drug into a vein after clipping away a small area of fur. Occasionally, if your pet is very collapsed, the injection is made directly into the kidney or similar. Small pets (rats, mice etc) are often allowed to breathe in anaesthetic gas first before being given an injection as their veins are so small.

Once the final injection is given, it usually only takes a few seconds for your pet to become unconscious. Death follows soon after. Your vet will confirm that death has taken place by listening to the chest with a stethoscope and gently touching the eye to check that the corneal reflex has disappeared. At this stage you may notice some things that may be upsetting if you are not prepared. Your pet's eyes will not close. He/she may pass some urine or faeces after they have died and occasionally fluid may be discharged from the mouth and nostrils (particularly if the pet has suffered from heart or lung disease). It may appear that your pet has started to breathe again, but the chest can move as air escapes from the lungs. Your pet's body will become floppy.

Should my other pet say goodbye?

With bonded pets you may want to try if it is possible to let the survivor spend some time with his/her deceased companion. Some pets ignore deceased companions, whereas others will show a marked interest before moving away. Don't be upset if your pet shows no interest - this is just as normal a response as apparently "saying goodbye".

Children

It can be difficult to explain to children why a pet needs to be euthanased, but it is usually better to discuss it with them first so that they gain a good understanding of the realities involved in looking after a pet. Children may also find it difficult to cope with the loss of a pet afterwards. A very helpful book has been written called "Missing My Pet" by Alex Lambert which you may find useful, and is available from Reception.

Cremation

We use a pet crematorium based in Royston, Hertfordshire, Cambridge Pet Crematorium (www.cpccares.com). You can choose a standard cremation, or you can elect to have your pet's ashes returned in a presentation container, which usually takes seven to fourteen days - our receptionists will notify you when they are ready for collection. You can even visit the crematorium if you wish.

Please ask a member of staff if you would like more information.

Support for bereaved pet owners

If needed, support for grieving owners is available by telephoning 0800 096 6606 (freephone) or via email on pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk.



Finally, don't be afraid to show how you feel about your pet. Virtually every member of our veterinary team will have owned a pet and experienced the same roller-coaster of emotions as you.



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