

## “When you have to say goodbye”

As pet lovers we all feel the bond that ties us to our animal family members. This human-animal bond can be, and often is, as strong as any inter-human bond. One of the problems with getting so close to these relatively short-lived creatures is that we'll likely have to say goodbye one day. From the day we come across that feisty stray kitten in the bushes, or adopt that cute puppy from the shelter we assume the responsibility to make decisions in the best interest of that animal for the rest of its life. That includes the ever so difficult decision of euthanasia if their quality of life is poor, or they are suffering as a result of illness or injury.

I realize the topic of pet euthanasia is a sensitive one, and frankly I hesitated to write about it. But after some thought and reflection I realized that if a veterinarian can't openly talk about euthanasia and possibly help someone struggling with this issue-then who can?

I thought it might be helpful to talk about some of the very common questions that surround pet euthanasia: How is it done? Does it hurt the animal? How are the animal's remains handled? I'll also offer some advice for all animal lovers about how they can get through this difficult issue. Remember the one thing that most pet owners have in common is that we will likely outlive our pets. Odds are good we will all probably, at some time, face a decision about euthanasia for our beloved animal friends.

Veterinarians approach the task of euthanasia very seriously. Remember your veterinarian has to do this many times over the course of his or her career. For this reason we as veterinarians must believe that the method we use is truly humane, brief, and painless. If that wasn't the case I doubt many of us would sleep much at night. The most common method of euthanasia is the intravenous injection of a barbiturate medication that rapidly renders that failing pet unconscious. Within a few seconds this same medication arrests the heart. This method assures us, and the pet owner alike, that the animal feels no pain or anxiety, and simply “falls asleep”.

After a pet is put to rest arrangements must be made for his or her remains. Each veterinary hospital handles this differently. Many offer special handling of the remains through a separate pet memorial park. Various options exist including burial and cremation services. In my experience it's easier on the pet owner if we discuss these issues beforehand.

Over the years I've worked with, and supported many families through the pain of their pet's euthanasia. I've come to recognize some common truths about this universally difficult time. Below I offer some advice for families who may be facing the loss of their pet.

- 1) Euthanasia is a very personal decision.

While I encourage individuals facing euthanasia of their pet to seek the support of friends and family, I truly feel that the pet owner should make the decision on his or her own terms. So often I see well-intentioned family or friends imposing their own opinions and ideas on the grieving pet-owner. The “right time”, the “right place”, and the “right reasons” for putting your pet to sleep vary tremendously for each pet lover. They need to do what feels right for them and their pet.

- 2) Don't let someone tell you “It's just a dog/cat/bird”.

Rarely in our practice do we ever see “just a dog/cat/bird”. These animals are vital members of your family. You spend years caring, nurturing, training, and loving them. Psychologists tell us the grief felt with the loss of a pet can be equal to that felt with the loss of a human family member.

- 3) Think about things ahead of time

When I work with a family that has a terminally ill pet I will often encourage them to at least think about how they might approach euthanasia when the time comes. Some will make arrangements well in advance. I think this helps to reduce the number of decisions they need to make when their pet is ready to be put to sleep. Talk to your veterinarian.

He or she surely understands the feelings you are experiencing and can help and support you through this tough time.

- 4) Seek help if you feel you need it.  
After your pet is gone you may feel profoundly sad. Everyone deals with this grief differently. The UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine sponsors a Pet Loss Support Hotline for individuals who feel they might benefit from talking to someone about their loss. Your veterinarian can help you find out more about this valuable service
- 5) Euthanasia is a caring and loving act.  
Understand that euthanasia of a terminally ill or injured pet may be the most caring and loving thing you will ever do for your pet. I encourage families to look at euthanasia as a final “gift” for their pet that will finally bring to an end their pain and suffering.

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