



Saying goodbye — the ultimate kindness

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT EUTHANASIA



Animal Welfare Foundation

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AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession

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Owning pets brings many joys to both owners and pets alike. Our lives and those of our pets vary remarkably but the one thing we all have to face at some point is the loss of the animals we love. There are volumes written on how to cope with bereavement but making the decision to end your pet's life, and the act itself, are rarely talked about.

This leaflet will hopefully tell you everything you need to know about euthanasia — having your animal put to sleep — so that you know what choices you have and what to expect at every step of the way.

The ultimate kindness

Virtually every pet owner would prefer their pet to die in its sleep because nobody wants to make the decision to end a life. This is a perfectly normal human reaction but unfortunately natural deaths are rarely as peaceful and pain-free as we picture them. Euthanasia, or putting animals to sleep, is without doubt the kindest way to a dignified end for your pet.

No matter what else we do as vets, helping you, the owner, through the loss of your pet is the most important part of our job. If you know what your choices are and what to expect, you will hopefully feel comfortable with the decisions you've made and won't feel self-conscious asking questions. Your vet won't mind at all, no matter how trivial you might think something is.

Having to say goodbye to a pet that you've grown up with can be particularly hard

- ▶ Alice Allsopp and her dog Shadow



Making the decision

This is the hardest part for any pet owner. It can hang over you for a long time and cause many sleepless nights. It's perfectly normal to worry about whether you will know when the time is right. Your family, friends and your vet can all help. It may not be so difficult if your pet has been injured or has an incurable disease. However, for many owners, if your pet has just got older and their quality of life has gradually deteriorated, this final step can be the hardest one. How will you know from one day to the next when the time is right? How can you justify it one day but not another? These are questions we can never answer because they are all questions that can only be answered with hindsight.

Talk to your family and try to think about the life your pet once had. Looking back at photos and videos can sometimes help to show you just how much a pet has aged or how infirm or inactive they have become. A good rule of thumb to remember is this: if you are thinking about it and talking about it, then it's almost certainly the right time to do it.

Talk to the people you know and trust at your vet's practice. They will give you the detached point of view we all so often need. Don't be surprised if you feel a huge sense of guilt. One of the hardest facts about euthanasia is that it is you who decides to end your pet's life and this can feel unbearably hard. Virtually all owners feel guilty and this is another reason why using and involving your vet and their team is so important. They can help you shoulder that burden and take the decision and that guilt out of your hands.

The phrase 'the ultimate kindness' may sound like a cliché but try to remember that it is true. Allowing your pet a pain-free and dignified end is possibly the kindest thing you will ever do for them. Feeling safe in that knowledge can really help you to come to terms with it.



Where and when will it happen?

When possible, this will be up to you. Your vet will do their best to do it where and when you would prefer. For some this may be a home visit when the whole family can be there or might mean leaving the pet at the surgery and not staying at all. There is no right or wrong choice. It is totally up to you.

Sometimes the time and place may be out of your hands. For example, if your pet has had surgery and the news is bad, your vet may feel the kindest thing is for them to be put to sleep on the operating table. The vet will always contact you before they do anything, and when possible they will offer you the chance to say goodbye unless they feel it is not fair to your pet. Whatever happens, don't be afraid to ask. It's important you know everything that is going on and your vet's reasons for everything they are suggesting.

How will it be done?

This worries many owners and is one of the reasons some don't stay with their pet when they might have liked to. The exact method will vary between vets and the type of animal your pet is. Ask your vet what will happen and ask if there are choices you may want to consider. The simplest explanation for virtually all pet euthanasia is an overdose of anaesthetic. For many animals, especially dogs and cats, this may be injected straight into a vein and most of the time it will be possible for you to hold or comfort your pet while it is done.

In some cases your vet may give a sedative first to make your pet drowsy before the final injection is given. Talk to your vet about this option. Although it may sound ideal, in some cases it can make finding a vein harder and some drugs can make your pet feel a little sick which you might want to avoid. Your vet will be happy to discuss the options with you and find what you both think will be best.

For small pets like hamsters, rats and guinea pigs, your vet may need to sedate them either by injection or with a gas first. These animals do not have veins big enough to allow the same type of injection and will usually, once unconscious, have an injection into their abdomen, letting them drift away peacefully. In these cases, especially if it is a child's pet, your vet may recommend that you don't stay with the animal but the choice is yours.

Will it be over quickly?

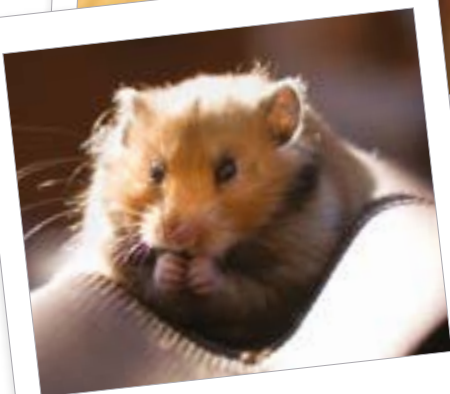
In short, yes, it is usually over surprisingly quickly. The anaesthetic reaches the heart and brain within seconds and your pet will be aware of nothing after the initial pin-prick. If you or your vet has chosen to use a sedative first, it may take a few moments longer, simply because the blood pressure is lower. Don't worry, your pet will still feel no pain or discomfort.

Be prepared for some of the things which can happen immediately after the injection if you decide to stay. Every animal, including humans, has some reflexes which can happen at the time of death. They can sometimes look quite shocking or upsetting but if you know what they are, you can be prepared.

Do remember these all happen after death and your pet is not aware of them at all. They may take some very big, deep breaths or gasps. Sometimes they will make a noise at the same time. This is just a reflex spasm and is not normal breathing. You may see some muscle twitching which might move your pet's legs or head. They might also empty their bladder or bowels. These are simply reflex actions and only last a few moments. Being prepared and knowing what to expect will make the whole process much easier to deal with. In many cases none of these things happen and your pet will simply drift away peacefully.

What happens next?

This is up to you and will depend on where you have chosen to have your pet put to sleep. If you are at the surgery, your vet will usually try and make sure you can have as much time as you need or want with your pet afterwards. Grief affects people in hugely different ways and you mustn't feel embarrassed about expressing yourself. It is all part of coming to terms with your loss. Your vet will have seen every emotion and will not think any less of you whatever your reaction is. You may want to hold and pet your animal for some time or you may want to leave straight away. Whatever your reaction, it is normal so you must do what you need to do.



What happens to my pet?

There are several options. Firstly, if you have the space and your vet is happy your pet doesn't have an infectious disease, you can take your pet home to bury it. This is something many owners of small pets do routinely but you can also bury your cat or dog if you want to. In some instances people also bury horses but you will need to discuss it with your vet as there may be some restrictions on this.

Probably the most common choice nowadays is cremation. For a standard cremation you simply leave your pet with your vet who will arrange for your pet to be collected and cremated and the ashes will be dealt with at the crematorium.

You can also choose to have an individual cremation and have your pet's ashes returned for you to keep, scatter or bury depending on what you want to do. This service is more expensive than a normal cremation, so talk to your vet about all the options and the different costs involved.

A common worry is whether the ashes you will receive will actually be your animal. Of course there will always be a certain element of trust with this, just the same as with human cremation, but talk to your vet about the crematorium they use and they can reassure you. Many crematoriums are very open about their level of service and are happy for you to visit beforehand or will let you take your pet yourself and you may be able to wait while they are cremated. Lots of owners find this added peace of mind really helps them cope with the process.

Paying for the procedure

This is an issue which can cause upset between vets and owners because presenting the bill for the services around euthanasia can be so difficult. Try and discuss this beforehand so you have an idea of what the cost will be and what the vet's policy is. The cost of this skilled and crucial process can be more than you might expect, especially if cremation is added. It is always best to be open and frank about these things and if you've discussed it beforehand, you and your vet can avoid any awkwardness that might arise afterwards. You may also be able to pay your account before the procedure.



Grieving

There is no easy or quick way to get over the loss of a much-loved pet but there is some excellent help around. Ask your vet or search online for advice and do remember that it helps to talk to friends, family and other pet owners. Sharing your grief, talking about your pet and trying to remember the many wonderful times you shared with them will help enormously.

Ask your vet or vet nurse for further information on grieving and bereavement.

**Ask
your
vet**





Animal Welfare Foundation

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession. We are committed to improving the welfare of all animals through veterinary science, education and debate.

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