How Will I Know?

Assessing Quality of Life and Making Difficult Decisions for Your Pet

As pet owners, we accept the loving responsibility of making decisions about the health and well-being of our animals. These may be pleasant decisions, like what food to choose or what type of activities we enjoy together. However, pet ownership also means being faced with difficult decisions, such as whether or not to go forward with surgery or treatment of a disease. Often the hardest decisions we face regarding our pets involve geriatric and end-of-life care. The needs and beliefs of each family are different, and what might be the right choice for one pet may not be right for another. It is our hope that this guide will help and support you, whether you are considering a particular treatment plan or end-of-life care.

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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Making Difficult Decisions

The following questions are provided to help guide and support you, whether you are considering a particular treatment plan or end-of-life care.

Questions to ask yourself before making a treatment decision (such as surgery or chemotherapy):

- What will happen in the near future that will be significant to my pet? Can my pet's pain or anxiety about upcoming procedures be well-controlled while hospitalized or healing? Is the procedure likely to give my pet good quality of life for some period of time? How do I feel about the medical information I've been given about my pet's prognosis (the likely course of my pet's illness and treatment)?
- Do I have the financial resources to go forward with the procedure and handle ongoing treatment expenses? If I do not have health insurance for my pet (which is true for the majority of pet owners), can I sacrifice from other areas of my family's budget to provide this care?
- Do I feel like I have all the information I need to make this decision comfortably? Are there questions I need to ask my veterinarian to better understand my pet's treatment options?
- Do I have the emotional and physical stamina to provide the ongoing care my pet needs, or do I have the means to have someone else to provide care? Am I ready to undertake the care that may be required, such as lifting or assisting with walking, assisting with bathroom functions, performing physical therapy, giving medication, maintaining a feeding tube, preparing special food, or monitoring overnight?
- What is my personal "bottom line" with regard to my family's lifestyle and how it will be impacted by this decision? Are there any aspects of this treatment or aftercare that I am unable to accommodate?

Making Difficult Decisions

Questions to ask yourself before making an end-of-life decision (such as euthanasia or hospice care):

- What are my religious, spiritual and personal beliefs regarding end-of-life care? Do I have a trusted friend, spiritual advisor or veterinarian who can help me make this decision?
- Have I asked the questions I need to ask in order to feel knowledgeable about euthanasia? Do I have fears or concerns that I would like to discuss with my veterinarian, so that I have a better understanding of how euthanasia is handled and what my pet and I would experience?
- Are there friends or family members who are close to my pet and would like to be included in this decision, or who would like to be present for my pet's euthanasia? Might I be comforted by including those close to me?
- What is the value for my pet to continue to live this way? What is the value for me or my family members for my pet to continue to live this way? Is the value higher for us than for our pet?
- If I elect to provide hospice care for my pet, are my veterinarian and I able to adequately control my pet's discomfort or anxiety? Am I willing to give the medications or provide the treatments that will be necessary to minimize my pet's distressing symptoms? Will I be honest with myself if my pet's symptoms and anxiety are no longer well-controlled?

Anticipatory Grief

When a pet goes through a serious illness or a decline in health, it is very natural for a pet owner to experience a phenomenon known as "anticipatory grief," which is grieving before the pet's death. Just like grief after a death, anticipatory grief involves a host of physical, emotional and mental reactions that can create sadness, denial and difficulty processing information. There may be many reasons that making the end-of-life decision feels overwhelming. The impending loss of a pet may bring back emotions related to other losses or deaths you may have experienced, which compounds the difficult emotions.

Making Difficult Decisions

Euthanasia Myths and Misconceptions

- *"My pet will die peacefully at home surrounded by family."*
  - Only a very small percentage of our pets experience a "good" death without our help. Many distressing changes can happen during the dying process: for you, your family and your pet. Anxiety, difficulty breathing, severe nausea, and seizures are some examples.
  - Many pets who are allowed to die naturally will do so overnight or while the owner is away. Some owners feel regret afterwards because their pet was alone when they died.
  - At-home euthanasia is offered by many veterinarians and provides a controlled, pain-free option for owners who prefer end-of-life care to happen at home.
- *"I would be killing my pet."*
  - Try to remember that your pet's illness, disease or injury is doing the harm to your pet. Euthanasia provides the opportunity to allow your pet to die humanely and with dignity. It is their illness which causes suffering; you are relieving that suffering in a loving and respectful way.
- *"Euthanasia is not natural."*
  - Many owners have religious or spiritual beliefs that euthanasia is wrong. Please be honest with us so that we may try to honor and respect your beliefs, as we help to plan end-of-life or hospice care for your pet.
  - Much of the medical care we provide our pets is, by definition, interrupting a "natural" process or illness. "Euthanasia is often not so much a question of 'artificially ending' a life, but of when to cease artificially extending that life." – Moira Anderson Allen pet-loss.net/euthanasia.shtml
- *"Planning and scheduling the euthanasia is strange."*
  - It can feel odd or wrong to schedule a time or place for your pet's euthanasia. By scheduling ahead (even by a few hours or days), you are taking some control over a situation over which you have little power. Many owners find comfort in scheduling a time when friends or family members can be present, or in scheduling a time before their pet is truly suffering.
- *"My pet will know what is happening."*
  - When handled properly, the euthanasia process is a loving, peaceful, dignified end of a pet's life. Your veterinarian can give many medications (including sedation and pain medication) that will relieve your pet's anxiety and pain. Our veterinarians often induce deep sleep (anesthesia) just prior to the euthanasia injection, to ensure that your pet does not experience pain or anxiety.
  - Animals live in the present moment. Unlike us, they don't know that a choice is being made—they only know that they are being loved, that you are with them, and that they don't feel pain anymore.
- *"I will just know when it's time." or "My pet will let me know."*
  - While there are sometimes signs, events or symptoms that occur that make the choice obvious, often the choice is not clear.
  - Many families tell us that they waited too long; families rarely tell us they made the decision too soon. Please know that it is normal and natural to second-guess a decision and that second-guessing does not mean you made the wrong choice. In cases of illness or declining quality of life there is truly no wrong decision to be made, only the decision you feel is best for your pet and your family.
  - While some euthanasia decisions are made in a crisis (such as an acute injury or illness), many euthanasia decisions are made after a gradual decline in quality of life. It can be challenging to trust, moment to moment, that now is the time. Read on for some techniques you can use to make this decision easier.

Making Difficult Decisions

Enlist the Help of Others You Trust

It may be helpful to ask those closest to you (and your pet) for their honest opinion about your pet's health and quality of life. Of those trusted friends, you may want to ask someone who sees your pet less frequently, since your pet's gradual decline in health, mobility or comfort may be more obvious to them. Remember that even members of the same household may have differing opinions of a pet's quality of life, and that these opinions may be colored by each family member's anticipatory grief process.

Your veterinarian and veterinary team may be able to provide valuable information about what treatment options remain for your pet and your pet's prognosis. Even though your veterinarian cannot make the euthanasia decision for you, they will be able to give you an honest medical perspective about your pet's current condition and comfort. To help you make a decision, your veterinarian may be able to answer the following questions:

- What are the best and worst case scenarios for the available options?
- What is your perception of the pain (or suffering) that my pet may be experiencing?
- Are you able to estimate my pet's life expectancy?

Evaluate Your Pet's Quality of Life

Determining the quality of life for a pet is often used to make end-of-life decisions. It's important to remember that each pet is an individual, and what constitutes a poor quality of life for one pet (such as lying around all day) may be normal for another. Although a pet's enjoyment of life depends on a variety of factors, physical symptoms — such as unrelenting pain or extreme difficulty breathing — should weigh heavily in the euthanasia decision. These factors constitute very poor quality of life, regardless of other factors.

As hard as it may be to consider end-of-life decisions, it is recommended that you start thinking about these issues early in the process, when your mind may be more clear. Decisions may seem forced or pressured if you wait until there is a crisis.

How Do I Know It's Time?

Several tools or techniques may provide more concrete answers to this subjective question.

- When your pet's health, mobility or comfort have been declining slowly, it may be helpful to view photos or videos of your pet from before the illness. Remember how your pet looked, behaved and interacted with you.
- Make a list of three to five things your pet likes to do, such as going for walks, playing with other pets, or enjoying their meals. When your pet is consistently unable to enjoy these things, it may be time to discuss euthanasia.
- Mark good and bad days on a calendar. This could be as simple as a happy or sad face for good or bad. As the bad days start to outnumber the good, it may be time to consider euthanasia. (The Grey Muzzle phone app is an example of an easy quality of life calendar for your smartphone.)
- Complete a quality of life scale worksheet
  - It may be helpful to have each family member complete a scale independently and then compare answers, since each family member may interact with the pet differently and therefore have a different perspective.
  - While completing a scale may help some owners come to a euthanasia decision immediately, most owners find these scales helpful to track changes in their pet's quality of life over time. Set a strict interval for repeating the quality of life scale. For example, decide to complete them every three days or on every Tuesday or whatever works best for your schedule.

One quality of life scale worksheet is on the next page of this booklet. Additional scales may be downloaded from vmc.vet.osu.edu/services/honoring-the-bond

Deciding to euthanize your companion animal may be one of the most difficult decisions you ever make. Often, well-loved pets are euthanized to minimize unnecessary suffering. The quality of animals' lives is defined by their overall physical and mental well-being, not just one aspect of their lives. The following chart attempts to consider all aspects of your pet's life. It is important to remember that all pets are different. What may be considered a poor quality of life for one may be different for another.

Higher numbers on this chart equal a better quality of life. This chart may help you to better visualize the general well-being of your pet. In some cases, even one item on the left-hand side of the chart (for example: pain) may indicate a poor quality of life, even if many of the other items are still positive. Some items or symptoms on the list may be expected side effects of the treatments that your pet is undergoing. It is important to discuss these symptoms and side effects with your veterinarian.

Survey Date: _____

Weight: _____

Poor Quality of Life ⟷ *Good Quality of Life*

My pet...	Strongly Agree (All the Time) (Severe)	Agree (Most of the Time) (Significant)	Neutral (Sometimes) (Mild)	Disagree (Occasionally) (Slight)	Strongly Disagree (Never) (None)
does not want to play	1	2	3	4	5
does not respond to my presence or does not interact with me in the same way as before	1	2	3	4	5
does not enjoy the same activities as before	1	2	3	4	5
is hiding	1	2	3	4	5
demeanor/behavior is not the same as it was prior to diagnosis/illness	1	2	3	4	5
does not seem to enjoy life	1	2	3	4	5
has more bad days than good days	1	2	3	4	5
is sleeping more than usual	1	2	3	4	5
seems dull and depressed	1	2	3	4	5
seems to be or is experiencing pain	1	2	3	4	5
is panting (even while resting)	1	2	3	4	5
is trembling or shaking	1	2	3	4	5
is vomiting and/or seems nauseous	1	2	3	4	5
is not eating well - (may only be eating treats or only if fed by hand)	1	2	3	4	5
is not drinking well	1	2	3	4	5
is losing weight	1	2	3	4	5
is having diarrhea often	1	2	3	4	5
is not urinating well	1	2	3	4	5
is not moving normally	1	2	3	4	5
is not as active as normal	1	2	3	4	5
does not move around as needed	1	2	3	4	5
needs my help to move around normally	1	2	3	4	5
is unable to keep self clean after soiling	1	2	3	4	5
has coat that is greasy, matted, or rough-looking	1	2	3	4	5
How is my pet's overall health compared to the initial diagnosis/illness?	1 Worse	2	3 Same	4	5 Better
Current Quality of Life (place "X" along the line that best fits your pet's quality of life)	Poor ⟷ Good				

This scale has been adapted, with permission, from The HHHHHMM Quality of Life Scale: Dr. Alice Villalobos; Quality of Life Survey: Dr. David Vail; End-of-Life Values and Goals worksheet: University of Tennessee Veterinary Social Work

The Euthanasia Decision: How It Affects Other Pets

If you have decided that euthanasia is the kindest choice for your pet, you may wonder whether it is appropriate to include your other pets in the process.

Some owners have reported fewer disruptions in their surviving animal's behavior when the surviving pet was allowed to see and smell the deceased pet after euthanasia. If you are considering having your other pet present during the euthanasia event, an important consideration is that your emotions may startle your surviving pet, making the experience more stressful. On the other hand, some owners feel comforted by the presence of their surviving pet.

Keep in mind that you cannot predict how your surviving pet will react to the presence of your deceased pet. It is common for the surviving pet to sniff the deceased pet. Other behaviors that seem disrespectful may occur, such as stepping on, urinating on, or barking at the deceased pet. These are all normal behaviors for animals, especially if they sense your stress at this difficult time. It is important to prepare yourself for these possibilities so that you can see them as normal pet grieving, rather than an insult to your deceased pet. Changes in the social structure and hierarchy of the pets still in the home can be disrupted by a loss, and they may struggle to determine their new place or allegiances.

Steve Uyehara

The Euthanasia Decision: How It Affects Children

If you have decided that euthanasia is the kindest choice for your pet, you may wonder whether it is appropriate to include your children in the process.

Children can learn valuable lessons about responsibility, compassion, commitment, and coping when they are involved in the decision-making process regarding the euthanasia of a family pet. Use your judgment as a parent regarding your child's personality, age, and level of development to frame your discussion of your pet's illness and euthanasia.

It is important to avoid the phrase "put to sleep," since young children may interpret this literally and become fearful of sleep for themselves or other loved ones. This phrase may also create confusion and anxiety for children regarding anesthesia for routine procedures, since the line between "sleepy enough for surgery" and death may be blurred. Using the simple term "die" or "help to die peacefully" may eliminate confusion about the word "euthanasia."

If you decide to have your children present for the euthanasia, prepare them ahead of time for what to expect. Ask questions of your veterinarian prior to the euthanasia so you feel able to guide your children through the process. Use language that is simple and clear. For example: "The veterinarian is going to give Buster medicine (in a shot) that will make his heart stop beating and make him stop breathing. It will not hurt Buster."

Most importantly, it is okay to show your emotions. Allow your children to see that being sad is normal and natural, so they feel invited to express and share their own feelings of sadness about your pet's death. It is critical for children to see you model appropriate emotional responses so that they feel safe in doing so. This has been shown to ease the grieving process for children and adults alike.

For more detailed information, please see our brochure *Helping Children Cope with the Serious Illness* or *Death of a Companion Animal*.

Treasuring Your Time

If you have decided that euthanasia is the most appropriate choice for all involved, you may choose a variety of ways to spend the last months/weeks/days of your companion animal's life. You may want to spend additional time with your companion animal, doing special things together. That might mean giving extra attention, including petting, grooming, holding them or making them special meals to eat. (Be cautious about upsetting gastrointestinal issues- check with your veterinarian if you have any questions about what would be suitable). You may decide to go on a special trip or walk. When you have decided on the time for the euthanasia, you may choose to be present or not. There is no right or wrong choice, only a loving choice.

The Honoring the Bond Program at The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center

The mission of the Honoring the Bond (HTB) program is to recognize and honor the human-animal bond by providing support to companion animal owners.

Our social workers can assist in the following ways:

- Act as a liaison between the companion animal owner and veterinary medical team
- Provide crisis intervention during difficult situations
- Assist in processing difficult decisions (quality of life assessments, treatment decisions)
- Be present before, during, and/or after euthanasia
- Facilitate family discussions with children
- Provide assessment and referral for further follow-up counseling, if needed
- Provide resources, including reading lists, websites, counselor and pet loss support group referrals, cremation/burial resources, memorial ideas, etc.

Honoring the Bond program services are available, at no cost, to clients of the Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center. If you would like to speak with someone from HTB, you may:

- Ask your clinician, student or client services representative to contact us
- Contact us directly at 614-247-8607
- Access our website and email at: vmc.vet.osu.edu/services/honoring-the-bond

Honoring the Bond is a nonprofit program, relying on the generous donations of owners, veterinarians and businesses. To donate to the HTB program, please go to go.osu.edu/giveHTB