



How Will I Know It's Time to Say Goodbye?

A guide to euthanasia for your pet





How Will I Know It's Time to Say Goodbye?

Assessing your pet's quality of life

We have heard from countless pet owners that the death of their pet was worse than the death of their own parents. This might sound blasphemous to some, but to many, it's the cold truth.

Deciding to euthanise a pet can feel gut-wrenching, murderous and immoral.

Families may feel that they are letting their pet down, or that they are causing their best friend's death. They forget that euthanasia is a gift that, when used appropriately and at the right time, prevents further physical suffering for the pet and emotional suffering for the family.

The hardest part of the experience is making the actual decision, and I'm asked on a daily basis, *"Doc, how will I know when it's time?"*

As veterinarians, our job is to help a family make this difficult decision. There is no perfect moment to make this ultimate choice, unless the pet is truly suffering - something we are trying to prevent in the first place.

Rather, there is a subjective time period, which may be hours, days, weeks, or months, when euthanasia is the appropriate decision.

Prior to this time, veterinarians may refuse to euthanise a pet because they still have a good quality of life. However, after this period passes we may advocate for euthanasia, because their sustained suffering is obvious.

During this subjective time, the family must make whatever decision is best for them. Some owners need time to come to terms with their pet's decline, while others may want to prevent any unnecessary suffering at all.

Every pet owner is different and entitled to their own thoughts and beliefs. After all, you know your pet better than anyone - including us.

Concerned about your pet's quality of life? It's not as simple as saying 'when he stops eating' or 'you'll just know.'

Our *Quality Of Life assessment* (at the end of this document) is a tool to help you and your family evaluate your pet's quality of life. Print this PDF, keep it in plain sight and have multiple people in the family use it daily or weekly.

Quality of life

You have probably heard the term "quality of life" in conversations with your family, veterinarian or people close to you. Assessing your pet's quality of life is difficult, as it is subjective and highly dependent on your dog or cat's disease process, their personality and your personal beliefs.

Like humans, every pet will experience and react to changes in their body differently. Their response is also highly dependent on the disease process at hand, making in-depth discussions with us an important part of the process.

For example, a pet owner should make the decision to euthanise a Yorkshire Terrier with congestive heart failure before painful symptoms arise, such as difficulty breathing. Alternatively, an older Labrador Retriever with arthritis can be maintained at home with adequate pain management for an extended time period.

It is important to understand the disease process your pet is experiencing to properly evaluate their quality of life. The flyers and questionnaires in this section of our website contain information about specific changes you can expect with various medical conditions.

Pain and anxiety

Pain is one of the most important topics we discuss in veterinary hospice care.

Many professionals believe carnivorous animals, such as cats and dogs, are not as bothered by pain as humans. At HVH, we totally DISAGREE with this belief.

This is vastly different from prey animals, such as rabbits and guinea pigs, who must hide their pain to prevent being attacked.



In addition, animals do not attach emotion to their pain like humans. We react to Fluffy's cancer diagnosis much differently - Fluffy doesn't know she has a terminal illness, so it bothers us more than it bothers her.

If you're interested in learning more about pets' pain and suffering, read chapter five in Temple Grandin's book *Animals in Translation*.

When considering euthanasia, you should be as concerned about your pet's anxiety as you are about their pain. Frankly, anxiety can be worse than pain to some animals.

Think about the last time your dog went to the veterinarian. How was his behaviour? Was he nervous in the exam room? Did he give you that "*This is terrible!*" look?

My dog acts considerably more distraught when she is anxious than when she is in pain, which is also typical for pets who are dying. For example, many end-stage, arthritic dogs begin panting, pacing, whining, and/or crying, but these symptoms are due to anxiety, usually secondary to pain. This is akin to being stung by a bee that you do not see in that you may be more anxious about not understanding the pain's origin (and therefore the pain's duration and potential worsening) than the pain itself.

Due to hormonal fluctuations and other factors, these anxiety signs usually worsen at night. The carnivorous dog's body is telling him that he is no longer at the top of the food chain. He has been demoted, and if he lies down, he will become someone else's dinner. Anti-anxiety medications can often help with this.

Waiting too long

The more times families experience the loss of a pet, the sooner they make the decision to euthanise.

Owners experiencing a pet's decline or terminal illness for the first time will generally wait until the very end to make the difficult euthanasia decision. They are fearful of euthanising their pet too soon and giving up without a good fight.

In the end, many of these owners regret waiting too long. They reflect back on the past days, weeks, or months and feel guilty for putting their pet through numerous veterinary trips or uncomfortable medical procedures that did not improve their pet's quality of life.

The next time, they recognise their pet's decline and are more likely to make the decision at the beginning, rather than the end, of the decline.

What about a natural death?

Yes, some pets peacefully fall asleep and pass naturally on their own. However, as in humans, such a peaceful death is rare.

Many owners fear their pet passing alone, while others do not.

Occasionally, we are asked to help families through the natural dying process with their pet. For varied reasons, these families are opposed to euthanasia.

We explain everything we possibly can, including how a natural death may look, how long it may take, and what their pet may experience. Almost all families regret choosing a natural death. Most comment afterward, *"I wish I would not have done that. I wish she hadn't suffered so much."*

A natural death can be difficult to watch, especially for non-medically oriented people. Most people can more easily watch a human family member in pain than their pet.

To an extent, we can talk other humans through physical pain or discomfort, but we cannot comfort a pet who is suffering.

Families find this guilt difficult. We do our best to not only readily suggest euthanasia when appropriate, but also prepare families for a worst-case scenario should they choose to wait.

Of course, death is nothing to fear, and your pet happening to pass on their own is certainly not a bad thing - it happens in nature frequently!

Weigh your options carefully

If the most important thing is waiting until the last possible minute to say goodbye to your fur baby, you will most likely face an emergency, stress-filled, sufferable passing for your pet that may not be peaceful. You may then regret waiting too long.

If you wish for a peaceful, calm, loving, family-oriented, in-the-practice or in-home end-of-life experience for your pet, you will probably need to make the decision a little sooner than you want.

This decision should not be about ending suffering that has already occurred, but about preventing any suffering in the first place. Above all, our pets do not deserve to hurt.

We are here to help make this time easier for everyone involved. The goal of veterinary hospice care is maintaining comfort, quality of life, and the human-animal bond for as long as needed. We are here for you throughout the entire process.



How Do I Know When it's Time?

Assessing Quality of Life for Your Companion Animal and Making End-of-Life Decisions

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 chart on the opposite side of this fact sheet 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.

Questions to ask yourself:

- What is the most important thing when considering my pet's end-of-life treatment?
- What are my thoughts about euthanasia?
- Would I consider euthanasia if the following were true about my pet:
 - Feeling pain?
 - Can no longer urinate and/or defecate?
 - Starts to experience seizures?
 - Has become uncontrollably violent or is unsafe to others?
 - Has stopped eating?
 - Is no longer acting normally?
 - Has a condition that will only worsen with time?
 - Financial limitations prohibit treatment?
 - Palliative (hospice) care has been exhausted or is not an option?
 - The veterinary team recommends euthanasia?
 - The veterinary team recommends euthanasia, but the required symptoms or situations that I listed above are not present?

"How do I know when it's time?"

The following tools may aid you in making the decision to euthanize.

- Enlist the help of your veterinarian. While your veterinarian cannot make the decision for you, it is helpful for him/her to know that you are considering euthanasia.
- Remember how your pet looked and behaved prior to the illness. Sometimes changes are gradual, and therefore hard to recognize. Look at photos or videos of your pet from before the illness.
- Mark good and bad days on a calendar. (Some may choose to distinguish morning from evening.) This could be as simple as a happy or sad face for good or bad. If the bad days start to outweigh the good, it may be time to discuss euthanasia.
- Write a concrete list of three to five things your pet likes to do. When your pet is no longer able to enjoy these things, it may be time to discuss euthanasia.

The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center - **Columbus**
601 Vernon L. Tharp Street, Columbus, OH 43210
(614) 292-3551

The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center - **Dublin**
5020 Bradenton Avenue, Dublin, OH 43017
(614) 889-8070

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How Do I Know When it's Time?

Assessing Quality of Life for Your Companion Animal and Making End-of-Life Decisions

Survey Date: _____

Poor Quality of Life

Good Quality of Life

Weight: _____



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)					

Much of this document has been adapted, with permission, from the following sources: 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 Department