

Euthanasia

Electing euthanasia is one of the most difficult decisions pet owners face. The thought of ending a beloved pet’s life is never easy; it is a considerable and deeply personal choice. It is important to take the time to educate yourself on the subject and consider the options carefully. Doing so can help you avoid any feelings of guilt or regret, leaving you at peace with the decision you have made on your pet’s behalf.

**What is euthanasia?**

Euthanasia literally means “good death.” It is the practice of intentionally and humanely ending a life in order to relieve pain and suffering. This is done via an intravenous injection of euthanasia solution, which is typically an overdose of pentobarbital or sodium thiopental. This overdose results in very quick and painless respiratory and cardiac arrest.

**When to consider euthanasia**

Choosing euthanasia for your pet can be an extremely difficult and distressing decision. Some factors, however, may help determine when your pet’s time has come. Consider, for example, whether the pet is in incurable pain or continual discomfort that is not alleviated by medication, whether treatment of the pet’s condition is no longer possible and whether his/her quality of life has significantly diminished. Your veterinarian can offer advice, guidance and support during this time and together, you can make the best decision for your beloved pet.

Other questions to consider may include:

* Is your pet enjoying the activities that he/she used to? Is he/she eating, walking and playing as appropriate for his/her age and ability? Does your pet seem to enjoy interaction with other pets and family members?
* Is your pet able to eat and drink normally? Is he/she eating his/her normal amounts? If your pet needs to be assisted, is your pet getting adequate fluid and nutrition?
* Is your pet able to urinate and defecate normally? Is your pet still housebroken or having more accidents?
* Is your pet in pain? Is pain adequately controlled with medication?

**Preparing for the appointment**

It is important to be completely prepared once euthanasia has been elected for your pet. Remember that every pet owner experiences the death of a pet differently. It is normal to experience a wide range of feelings during this time, but preparation can help you cope with the next step.

When you feel it is time to schedule your pet’s euthanasia, be sure to tell the receptionist that you would like to schedule an appointment during a “quiet” time of day, like early morning or evening.

At Hope Animal Medical Center, all necessary paperwork and payments are handled ahead of time to minimize stress during this difficult time.

Arrangements for aftercare are often also determined beforehand, but can be made during or after the appointment if you prefer. Most owners choose to leave the deceased pet with the veterinarian for cremation. If you elect to have the pet cremated, you may choose routine interment, in which the animal is cremated communally and the ashes are spread together, or personal cremation, in which the animal is cremated individually and the ashes are returned to you.

Another important decision to make regarding this appointment is whether or not you would like to be present during the procedure. The choice to be present for the administration of the euthanasia solution is deeply personal and varies greatly from one pet owner to another. Many people simply cannot bear to witness their beloved pet’s passing, while others feel it is important to support their pet through his/her final moments. Some owners may even choose to wait until the euthanasia has been performed before saying a final goodbye to their pet in private.

Remember, the grieving process is different for everyone and each is respected just the same. Some pet owners prefer to leave the hospital as soon as possible after their pet has been euthanized, while some may stay with their deceased pet for a significant length of time after the procedure. Some owners cry with their veterinarian over the loss of a beloved pet, while others may act detached. All of these are considered “normal” reactions to death.

**What to expect**

Euthanasia can be frightening if you do not know what to expect. Before the procedure, your veterinarian will explain the process in detail and answer any questions you may have. Though it can be unsettling to think about, the more knowledge you have about this procedure, the more at ease you will be when your pet’s time comes.

The euthanasia solution is made up of barbiturates designed to overdose animals quickly and painlessly by stopping the heart and breathing muscles. These are given intravenously to ensure the rapid onset of cardiac arrest, which generally occurs within 30 to 60 seconds.

In order to administer the solution, the veterinarian must gain entry into the pet’s vein. In many cases, the pet will be taken back to the treatment area of the hospital to have an IV catheter placed before the actual injection is given. A veterinary technician will shave a small patch of hair on your pet’s foreleg and place the catheter before bringing him/her back into the exam room for euthanasia. Placement of an IV cathether allows the veterinarian to administer the euthanasia solution more efficiently and ensures the process is as smooth as possible for you and your pet.

Sometimes, the veterinarian may also elect to sedate the pet before the euthanasia solution is given. Similar to an anesthetic injection prior to surgery, this painless injection will heavily sedate the pet so he/she rests peacefully. Some owners prefer to take a few quiet moments during this time to say goodbye before the final injection is given. Others may say goodbye to their pet during this time and leave the veterinarian to finish the procedure. Remember, this decision is entirely up to you and what you feel most comfortable with.

When you are ready, the veterinarian will administer the euthanasia solution. A veterinary assistant may help hold your pet or you may do this, if you wish. Within a few seconds after the solution is injected, the pet will take a slightly deeper breath and finally lapse into what appears to be a deep sleep. The total time it takes to complete this process is only a few minutes, oftentimes less. Finally, the veterinarian will listen to the pet’s heart and confirm that he/she has passed away.

Though every animal is different, there are a few things to be aware of and prepared for as death occurs. In most cases, you will only notice a peaceful release of tension as your pet slips away.

* The animal’s eyes will not close once he/she has passed away. This can be quite unsettling for some people. You may choose to leave the room during the injection and return to view the body only after the veterinarian has closed the eyes.
* There may be a last gasping breath or twitching. This is a muscle spasm that the animal is not aware of.
* The animal may vocalize, though this is uncommon.
* The heart may continue beating for a short period after breathing has stopped.
* The urinary bladder and bowels may be released.

**Letting go**

While most pet owners would prefer their beloved pet to pass away peacefully in sleep, this is a rarity. The vast majority of the time, it is best to choose humane euthanasia because the final stages of life can be painful and uncomfortable for your pet. During the gradual decline of your pet’s health, it is important to work with your veterinarian to determine the best way to care for him/her, including making the very tough decision about when to let him/her go.

All the doctors and staff at Hope Animal Medical Center have had their own personal experiences of loss and empathize greatly with the stress and difficulty you are experiencing. Remember, you are not alone—we are here to guide you through this process, including counseling you on how and when to make the final decision.

**Grief**

There is no easy way through grief. It can be especially difficult when you have to go back to normal life and find that you are still grieving your lost pet. There are many different ways to deal with all these feelings. Additional resources may be helpful for you as you navigate this process.