

Dunkirk Animal Clinic



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Euthanasia at the Dunkirk Animal Clinic

How Do I Know When It's The Right Time?

At the Dunkirk Animal Clinic, we know that the decision regarding the euthanasia of a beloved pet is one of the most difficult parts of pet ownership. It can be a very emotional struggle for many owners and often times we hear the question, "How do I know when it's the right time?". Sometimes the answer is obvious, for example, when the pet has been badly injured and has little hope of recovery, euthanasia may be the kindest choice. Other times, as in the case of an ailing older pet whose medical issues are becoming more and more debilitating, the decision of when to euthanize is not quite as clear. You want to be sure that the choice you make is what is best for the pet and you feel confident that you will not regret your decision. Many people worry about feeling guilty that they ended the pet's life prematurely, or on the other hand, that they waited too long. So, how do you know when the time is right?

The best answer to this question involves determining the quality of the life your pet is living. The following questions can help you to evaluate your pet's condition which in turn may help in the decision making process:

1. Is your pet experiencing pain? Does he suffer with aches and pains or are you able to minimize the level of pain and discomfort with medications or therapies? Is he able to get around on his own? Can he get outside to relieve himself?
2. Does your pet still have the desire to eat his food? Your pet's quality of life can partly be measured by his interest in food. A pet that is still enjoying his meals most likely still has the will to live.
3. Is your pet able to hold his urine? If not, does he seem uncomfortable or ashamed that he is having accidents in the house? The level of your pet's emotional distress needs to be taken into consideration. Are you able to keep your pet's skin, coat, and sleeping area clean and free of urine and feces? Are you willing to commit to the level of nursing care your pet needs?
4. Does your pet seem to sleep comfortably and enjoy some of his favorite activities? It is understandable if the older pet is no longer interested in a long walk in the woods, but does he still enjoy a scratch on the belly, a favorite treat, or quietly spending quality time with you?
5. Are your pet's "bad days" out-numbering his "good days"?

For a more detailed look at measuring quality of life, please go to www.Pawspice.com for a scoring system developed by Dr. Alice Villalobos, founder of the Hospice-like program for terminally ill pets. This quality of life scoring system, called the HHHHHMM scale (Hurt, Hunger, Hydration, Happiness, Mobility, and More Good Days Than Bad) can be a very useful tool for owners struggling with the decision of when to euthanize their pet. It can be found on the Pawspice website by clicking on the "Quality of Life Scale" green tab at the left side of the home page.

The doctors at the Dunkirk Animal Clinic may be your best resource in helping you determine if and when the time is right to euthanize your pet. In many cases the doctor has known the pet for most, if not all of its life, has access to the pet's medical history, and can evaluate the pet's current condition to give you a medical opinion that will help you decide the best course of action. Sometimes, what may seem like an insurmountable problem, may actually be a treatable, if not curable, condition. When in doubt, please call us for a consultation appointment or bring the pet in for an exam. The more information you have regarding your pet's condition, the better equipped you will be to make this decision.

What Should I Expect When I Bring My Pet In For Euthanasia?

Once you have made the decision to euthanize your pet, it is helpful to have some understanding as to what will happen once you come in for your appointment. Upon arrival at our clinic, we will check your pet in and ask you to fill out the necessary forms. Payment for services will also be taken care of at this time to eliminate the need to deal with it afterward when emotions are running high. Once the forms are signed and payment is completed, you and your pet will be called into the exam room and your pet will be weighed. You will then have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the procedure and talk to the doctor in regard to your pet's condition.

After addressing any questions/concerns, the doctor will give your pet a sedative injection (if needed) into the muscle that will help to calm him and make him sleepy. Some pets relax so much that they fall into a deep sleep. Your pet may even fall so deeply asleep he cannot be easily awakened. Other pets may get only slightly sleepy as the effects of the sedative vary greatly from patient to patient. You will be given time alone with your pet while the sedative is taking effect. This also varies widely with each individual pet, as some become sedate rather quickly and others can take 15 minutes or more.

Should I Stay For The Procedure?

You have the option to stay with your pet throughout the entire procedure or leave at any time. Everyone is different with their own past experiences and ideas in regard to their pet's last moments. Whether to stay or not is a very personal decision, there is no right or wrong answer. Some people would not dream of leaving their pet with strangers, where as others may feel strongly that they want to remember their pet as he was in life, or feel that they will be unable to endure witnessing their pet's death.



While deciding on whether or not to stay, keep in mind that sometimes despite our every effort to make euthanasia as calm and peaceful as possible, a pet may not drift quietly and peacefully into death. Though most of these procedures are peaceful, there are no guarantees that this will be true in every case and is something we would like you to be aware of. Sometimes a pet's blood pressure is low or he may have fragile veins due to debilitation or illness which can make the injection difficult. The doctor may have to try again on another leg to gain access to the vein which can be upsetting to the owner. There may also be a reflexive gasp or movement, urination, or bowel movement upon death that may be alarming or upsetting to some people. These are especially important considerations when deciding whether or not to have your child present. We recognize that this is a very personal choice and strive to accommodate every pet owner's preference.

Those who are not staying with their pet for the entire procedure usually say their final goodbyes and leave just before or soon after the doctor gives the sedative injection. If you decide that you cannot stay, rest assured that your pet will be handled with dignity and compassion. We all have pets of our own and will treat your pet how we would want our pets to be treated.

If you have decided to stay, when the pet is sleepy/asleep, the doctor will come back into the exam room and give the final injection into the pet's vein. Death comes very quickly, usually in a matter of moments, and the doctor will use a stethoscope to be sure all heart sounds have stopped. You will be given as much private time as reasonably needed with your pet for your final goodbyes and may leave when you are ready. Some owners take their pet's collar and/or a lock of hair as a keepsake and later find them a tangible comfort during the grieving process.

What Happens To My Pet's Body After Euthanasia?

You have two options as to what you would like to do with your pet's remains after euthanasia. You can choose to take your pet home for burial if your city/town ordinance allows, or you may choose to have your pet's body cremated. Should you choose cremation, you will have the option of a private or communal cremation. With the private cremation, you may choose to have your pet's ashes returned to you in a wooden urn with the option of having his or her name inscribed on the top. Please inquire with our receptionist about prices which are based on your pet's weight.

We contract with and trust Pet Heaven Funeral Home (www.petheavenfuneralhome.com) in Orchard Park, NY. They do a wonderful and compassionate job in dealing with the after-life care of our client's beloved pets. You may want to see their website for all services they offer. Any services beyond those already described would have to be arranged directly with Pet Heaven.

The Grieving Process:

In most cases, our pets have become an integral part of our family and it is only natural that we go through the process of mourning their loss. Please do not feel embarrassed or ashamed about grieving for your beloved pet whether it be in our exam room during euthanasia or in the privacy of your home. The entire staff here at the Dunkirk Animal Clinic are all animal lovers and each of us has gone through the very painful process of losing a pet that is very dear to us...our own as well as many of our patients. We know firsthand that losing a beloved pet is never easy and it takes time to adjust. There are many resources available to assist you through the grieving process and we encourage you to take advantage of them. These are just a few suggestions:



1. The University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine has a wonderful website devoted to pet loss and grieving and can be found at <http://vetmed.illinois.edu/CARE>. This website has a wealth of information, links, and contacts on many topics related to euthanasia, pet loss, and the grieving process.

2. The University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine offers a confidential telephone service called The C.A.R.E. (Companion Animal Related Emotions) Pet Loss Helpline which provides a compassionate, understanding person to talk to. This helpline is staffed by veterinary students who have received training by professional grief counselors and are there to listen and support pet owners through the grieving process. The toll free number is (877)394-2273 (CARE) and they are available Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday from 8-10pm. EST.

3. For Every Cat An Angel, and For Every Dog An Angel, by Christine Davis (children & adults)

4. Cat Heaven, and Dog Heaven, by Cynthia Rylant (for children) (These titles are available for purchase, new or used, at Amazon.com, or check your local library.)

Thank you for taking the time to read this article. We hope it has helped answer your questions regarding the most difficult decision a pet owner must face. We continually strive to better serve our client's needs and welcome questions or comments: dunkirkanimalclinic@yahoo.com, or call us at 366-7440.