

Euthanasia Process:

Making the decision to euthanize your pets can be one of the most difficult decisions you will ever have to make. While we all hope our beloved pets will pass away on their own peacefully in their sleep, this rarely happens in reality.

The word “euthanasia” is Greek in origin and means “good death.” Veterinarians are trained to provide this form of painless and stress-free death when a pet is facing diminished quality of life. Deciding on euthanasia is often our final act of kindness and compassion, the last gift we’ll ever give our pet.

The most common method of euthanasia involves the injection of a high dose of anesthetic-like drug, which allows the pet to become unconscious and pass away peacefully.

Trying to assess your pet’s quality of life can be complex and difficult, even for a trained veterinarian. Veterinary oncologists (who study & treat cancer) have developed an objective scale to provide owners and veterinary professionals specific guidelines to help determine if a pet’s quality of life is reasonably acceptable. They’ve distilled quality of life down to 7 aspects, abbreviated “HHHHMM”, which stands for Hurt, Hunger, Hydration, Hygiene, Happiness, Mobility, and More good days than bad:

- **HURT:** Adequate pain control and ability to breathe properly are vital parts of quality of life. Most pet owners do not realize that breathing difficulty is one of the most painful experiences for an animal; it is ranked at the top of the pain scale. Most of us don’t realize that our pets can be stoic or not display pain in ways humans may understand. Common signs of pain in cats and dogs include restlessness or reluctance to move, excessive panting or rapid breathing, hiding, unexplained aggression, and not eating.
- **HUNGER:** Can your pet eat on their own? Have they lost interest in food? While many animals can survive for many days without eating much, malnutrition can develop quickly in sick animals and contribute to progression of illness. Appetite stimulants, hand-feeding, and feeding tubes can help with decreased appetite.
- **HYDRATION:** Lack of eating/drinking and fluid loss (like vomiting and diarrhea) can contribute to dehydration. Fluids injected under the skin (Sub-Q in medical speak) can be a very effective method to help a pet feel better without being too invasive. This can be done at home if your vet shows you how and most animals are okay with it.
- **HYGIENE:** Can your pet be kept clean and do they still clean themselves? Is their coat matted? Is your pet able to move away from stool/urine if they have an accident? Prolonged exposure to bodily waste can cause skin scalding, which is very uncomfortable and can lead to systemic infections in severe cases.
- **HAPPINESS:** While every pet is different in what they enjoy most in life, some questions to consider include: is your pet responsive and willing to interact with the family? Is he/she able to enjoy food, toys, and the environment around them? Are they anxious or afraid?
- **MOBILITY:** Is your pet able/willing to go out for a walk? Can they be taken outside or helped into the litter box to eliminate with assistance? Sometimes slings and harnesses can help; other times mobility devices such as carts can be considered. Mobility is especially important for large dogs that cannot be carried from place to place.
- **MORE GOOD DAYS THAN BAD:** This one is at the end of the list for a reason. In the final weeks or days of your pet’s life, this is likely to be the most telling consideration for making the final decision to euthanize. When there are too many bad days in a row or if your pet seems to be “turned off” to life, quality of life is compromised. Bad days are filled with undesirable experiences such as vomiting, diarrhea, frustration, pain, inability to breathe well, lack of appetite, or seizures.

You can help your pet maintain a good day-to-day life experience by using the above scale to regularly assess the aspects of their life that evaluate how well your pet’s basic needs are being met. This scale can also help you clarify the decision for euthanasia, hopefully relieving anxiety and regret about your beloved pet’s end of life. Ultimately,

you know your pet best, and if you feel that any above category is being significantly affected, talk to your veterinarian about your options and whether euthanasia may be an appropriate consideration at this time.

How to Prepare

If it is possible and your pet is stable enough, it may be beneficial to have each family member have some private time with your pet to say goodbye. If your pet is still somewhat active, you may take a day to spend with your pet doing his or her favorite things.

If there are children in the family that are experiencing death for the first time, it is important to guide and support them through this process. Most of us are ill-equipped to explain something as sensitive as this to children. Fortunately, there is help available: The American Humane Association recommends books such as **Fred Rogers' 'When a Pet Dies'** or **'Remembering My Pet' by Nechama Liss-Levison and Molly Phinney Baskette** as a good way to provide comfort through this process of loss.

To the extent possible, make the following decisions BEFORE the time comes

Will the euthanasia be performed at the clinic, at your home or some other special place? Mirthwood Medicine offers in-home euthanasia because we understand many people don't want their pet's last memory to be a vet clinic. It can also be uncomfortable for your pet to be moved from their home, into the car, driven on country roads, maybe suffer the winter cold and then be moved into a clinic on a day when they may already feel painful or sick.

We can schedule our visit to your home largely at your convenience (provided we don't already have an appointment, etc.) and we can often do it on fairly short notice. We understand that once the decision has been made to say goodbye to your pet, you may want to proceed with the euthanasia as soon as possible. We are here for you.

We can usually accommodate evenings or even weekend times so that everyone can be there together, both for your pet's reassurance and for the comfort that sharing your pet's passing together can bring to the family.

Who will be present with your pet at the time the euthanasia is performed? Most people stay with their pet to their final moments; some do not. We understand that this is a very difficult time and grief can be processed in many different ways. You may want to be present, want to be absent, or want to be in a waiting area to view your pet after his or her passing only briefly. It is always our hope that everyone who loves the pet will be there with them on their final day. It is truly a great gift that you can give - that your pet can leave this world hearing encouraging and loving words from you and the gentle touch of your hand.

If you have children, are they going to be present? Pet loss is often a child's first experience with death; tread carefully here. This experience could have profound impact on how a child handles the loss of a loved one going forward. Be very careful what you say to children. Many well-meaning people say very inappropriate things at a time of a pet passing - things like:

"We will get another (dog or cat)." This implies that a pet is replaceable. While you can get another pet, you can never truly replace the one you had. Each one is different and special.

"He or she is in a better place." When you tell a child, especially a young child, the pet is in a better place they are not going to understand. What better place is there for a pet to be than in the loving arms of its owner?

"He or she is just taking a very long nap." A young child may then assume anyone who dies may wake up again. Also, saying a pet is being **"put to sleep"** could be dangerous. If your child needs to have surgery someday, you or the doctor may explain to them they are getting medicine to put them to sleep, and you may have a child who is terrified.

“The pet ran away.” Saying the pet ran away may leave the child always looking for the pet, wondering if they are injured, trapped, hungry or why the pet did not love them enough to stay.

Blaming the Vet... Never make the veterinarian or doctor out to be bad, as this could scare children away from seeking help for a sick pet or person in the family.

Please be careful what you say. While these ‘comforting’ ideas may seem innocent, they can be harmful.

Likewise, you may or may not want the entire family to be present. In some instances, children who don’t yet understand death may have difficulty respecting your need for quiet and calm during this emotional time. These are ultimately decisions that are up to your personal preference and it can be hard to know what to say, but help is readily available to make things easier for you and your children...

Some helpful resources for children include:

[An Age-by-Age Guide to Explaining the Death of a Pet to Children](#)

[Grief Watch – Children & Pet Loss](#)

[Explaining Pet Loss to Children](#)

What to Expect...

Euthanasia is meant to help animals pass on as peacefully as possible. While it is sad for everyone involved (it’s hard for vets and their assistants, too), remember that it’s not something you’re doing TO your pet; euthanasia is something that you’re doing FOR your pet. You’re helping them transition easily and smoothly once their best days are behind them.

If your pet is still eating, you may consider giving treats (including chocolate or ice cream, etc).

Our euthanasia process (whether at our clinic or your home) begins with Dr. Hannah McCormick and her assistant (Neil or Laurie) meeting the family and greeting the patient. It’s common for owners and family members to be concerned about whether “it’s the right time” or “the right thing to do”, which is perfectly normal and understandable. Dr. Hannah will look over your pet and talk with you about how things have been going, especially with regard to the quality of life considerations from the list above.

Dr. Hannah will help you understand why euthanasia may indeed be the best choice for your pet in their current condition and she will also let you know if she thinks that it may not be time yet and suggest measures which might be taken to help your pet feel better until the time actually comes. You will have expert, professional help – whether making your decision or confirming that it is the best decision. You’re not in this alone; we are here for you with answers to any questions you may have, before or during euthanasia.

To begin the process of euthanasia, the doctor may give your pet a small injection of a sedative through a tiny needle. Some pets will feel a ‘pinch’ and many do not react at all. The doctor and her assistant will usually leave the room then to give you and your family some alone-time with your pet. Over the next 5-10 minutes, your pet will become sleepy and probably lay down and close their eyes. Although they are very relaxed and comfortable at this point, they can still hear you speaking and know that you are there with them. This can be a good time to remind them of how much they mean to the family, how much you love them and what a good friend they have been.

After your pet is sedated and comfortable, we may use a small set of clippers to shave a bit of hair off one of their legs, followed by a wipe or two with an alcohol swab. The final injection will be given directly into the exposed vein, either through a butterfly (a small needle with a short tube attached to it) or directly from a syringe.

This injection is a cocktail of medicines created expressly for euthanasia and basically works like an overdose of anesthesia. This solution will eliminate their conscious awareness of passing before their body shuts down and their heart stops. The process is completely painless, and usually they will pass on within a few seconds to a minute.

After this injection, the doctor will confirm, by listening to your pet's heart with their stethoscope, that they have passed on. As with natural death, your pet's eyes may stay partially or even completely open, they may appear to take one or two more breaths (called reflex-breathing, which is not a struggle to breathe but is a common symptom of the body shutting down), you may feel them relax if they are in your arms, and they will appear to be in a deep sleep.

A blanket, towel or an absorbent pad is a good idea to have under your pet in case of bowel or urinary movements as they become totally relaxed. If your pet has been wearing a collar for his or her entire life, the collar can remain on until after your pet's passing to prevent stress or anxiety.

What If I Cry?

Lots of people are quite concerned about how they should act during the process of euthanasia. It is very important that you understand that there is absolutely no judgment during this time. We have been in your shoes. We've lost pets of our own and we do this work because we want to help animals end their lives in the best possible way. Crying is allowed; we do it, and there is no need to apologize for it. It only hurts so much because we love them so much...

It is also okay for you to laugh as you reminisce over the wonderful times that you have had with your pet. Lots of people gift us with heartwarming or funny stories of their pet while we are there with them and we love hearing them. Laughter through tears is possibly the greatest of all emotions.

No matter what age your fur-baby is when they pass on, you must remember that your love, care and companionship has made their life better, just as they've made yours.

Final Arrangements

Understandably, you may be emotionally overwhelmed after the event, so it can be a good idea to make your final arrangements beforehand. Below are the most common options to consider:

At-home burial: As we are located in a mostly rural area, many of our clients bury their pets near their homes or in a place that is special to them and their animal. If needs be, Neil can assist you in moving your pet to your vehicle or to a special place in your yard, etc. where you plan to lay them to rest. If you choose home burial, you will need to make sure there are no legal restrictions, and the hole is deep enough that wildlife and other neighborhood dogs do not dig up your pet's remains. Yes, this is difficult to read but better you should read it here than wake up to find your beloved pet's grave desecrated.

Cremation: Depending on the season and where you live, at-home burial may not be desirable or even possible and cremation is an excellent choice. We have a relationship with two wonderful Pet Cremation services:

Remember Me Pet Cemetery & Cremation Services:

3701 Military Tpke, West Chazy, NY 12992

(518) 493-7070

<https://www.facebook.com/people/Remember-Me-Pet-Cemetery/100086596540120/>

Adirondack Pet Cremation Service:

133 Sharron Ave, Plattsburgh, NY 12901

(518) 561-3980

adkpetcremationservice@gmail.com

<https://www.adkpetcremation.com/>

If you decide that cremation is the best option for you, you can get in touch with either of these crematoriums and arrange for your pet's aftercare with their caring and sympathetic staff. They will help you with the tough choices so there won't be stressful decisions when the time comes.

Upon completion of euthanasia, you can take your pet to the crematorium yourself, or we can take them back with us to Mirthwood Medicine Clinic where the crematorium will come and pick them up at no additional cost to you. You may also arrange for either place to come to your own home and pick up your pet but there may be an extra charge for that service.

If you wish to have your pet's cremated remains returned to you, you may pick them up at the crematorium yourself or they can be returned to Mirthwood Clinic (if they picked up your pet from us) and you can pick them up here in just a few days.

After Euthanasia

Once your pet has been euthanized, you may wish to arrange for somebody (a friend or family member) to be present to support you. Death, both natural and planned, is an emotional event, and it may be beneficial to have someone with you during this sad time.

Grief is also a very personal experience, and, depending on the situation and the individual, the mourning period may take several months or longer. It is important to cherish your memories of your pet, and it can be helpful to create a legacy to celebrate the life of your pet (by preparing a memorial, making a photo album, writing about them, etc...). However, it is also important to give yourself time to grieve and to care for yourself during this time. Although it may be tempting to immediately adopt another pet to fill the void, the Humane Society of America actually recommends not jumping into a new pet relationship until you are emotionally ready. It may be beneficial to reach out to trusted friends who have similarly expressed pet loss or even professional grief counselors. Online resources and phone hotlines that are available include the ASPCA Grief Counseling Hotline (not affiliated with the MSPCA) at 1-877-474-3310 or Tufts University Pet Loss Support Hotline at 1-508-839-7966.

What Does it Cost?

No prices are posted on the website because of the variables involved in travelling and the fluctuating costs of medicines and supplies, etc. Please give us a call so that we can talk about your pet's condition and quote you a price, either for an in-home visit or if you wish to come to Mirthwood Medicine clinic in Saranac, NY. Obviously, the price for in-home euthanasia is higher than if you bring your pet to the clinic. The difference in price is determined by how many miles we will be driving to get to you and how long the round-trip will take. There is no charge consideration for the amount of time we spend with you and your pet; we NEVER rush any euthanasia.

Final Comments:

Unfortunately, our furry friends have a lifespan which is much shorter than ours. When they become very sick, it is natural for family members to feel sorrow, guilt, stress, and even anger. It is important to plan for the end of life before that time arrives, if you can. Although it may feel impossible to say goodbye, euthanasia is often the final act of caring for your pet.

References:

1. Villalobos, A.E., Quality of Life Scale Helps Make Final Call, VPN, 09/2004, for Canine and Feline Geriatric Oncology Honoring the Human-Animal Bond, by Blackwell Publishing, Table 10.1, released 2006. <https://www.veterinarypracticenews.com/quality-of-life-scale/>
2. American Humane Organization. "Euthanasia: Making the Decision." <https://www.americanhumane.org/fact-sheet/euthanasia-making-the-decision/>. Accessed December 2018.

Quotes:

"I ask my Master and Mistress to remember me always but not to grieve for me too long . Not all the power of death can keep my spirit from wagging a grateful tail."

— Eugene O'Neill

"You think dogs will not be in heaven! I tell you they will be there long before any of us."

— Robert Louis Stevenson