

Pet euthanasia decisions involve quality-of-life considerations

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How do you know when it's time? Last month's Pet Health column provided information about the growing role of pet hospice as a gentle, at-home option for beloved pets when owners want to provide close monitoring and comfort at the end of their animals' lives.

Central to end-of-life decision-making for our pets is the topic of [euthanasia](#). The term "euthanasia" is derived from the Greek words eu, which means "good," and thanatos, meaning "death." Euthanasia is often viewed as a humane and painless gift of peace for a cherished pet.

Even so, we know the decision to euthanize an ailing pet – even if this is a compassionate end – often involves wrenching feelings and deep reflections about religious, spiritual, ethical and personal beliefs. Your veterinarian plays an important role in working with you during the decision-making process and in, first and foremost, understanding the enormity of this decision.

This capacity for compassion, and for honoring the human-animal bond, is a core element of our teaching in Colorado State University's Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Program and is an attribute that distinguishes clinicians at our James L. Voss Veterinary Teaching Hospital. A CSU program called Veterinary Communication for Professional Excellence is responsible for teaching effective communication skills – and discussions about pet euthanasia are the most sensitive and the important for our clients, especially as so many of us have grown to consider pets as true family members.

As you contemplate the potential timing of euthanasia, your pet's quality of life will be a key consideration. The time for euthanasia usually arrives when a pet's quality of life greatly diminishes.

There are two elements to consider: aspects of physical and emotional well-being. Your veterinarian can perform a physical examination and diagnostic testing that provide insights about important indicators, such as pain level, organ function, the effects of injury, and disease progression. The emotional needs of your pet include social companionship, mental stimulation and ability to cope with stress.

Below are some of the questions you and your veterinarian may discuss to help gauge quality of life and to help determine what is in the best interest of your pet. It may be helpful to work through these questions in your mind and/or with your family before meeting with your veterinarian.

- What are daily activities your pet has always enjoyed, and what are behaviors that signal this enjoyment? Write a list of these activities and behaviors to help think about them clearly. Entries might be something like: My dog loves to go on walks, and has always run in circles when I pick up her leash; my cat has always purred and rubbed on my legs when I'm reading in the living room.
- How many of these activities is your pet engaging in now? What changes have you noticed in your pet's behaviors that might indicate a change in quality of life?
- How would you assess your pet's interest or responsiveness to you and his [daily activities](#)? For instance: My dog no longer greets me at the door; my cat has lost interest in his mouse toy.
- How would you describe your pet's ability to perform basic functions, such as eating, drinking, pottying, exercising, interacting and sleeping? Describe what you have observed for

each basic function.

- One helpful approach: Frequently return to the list of your pet's favorite activities and happy behaviors, using check marks during each review to help keep tabs on quality of life.
- A similar approach: Keep a calendar to mark good days and bad days, using your pet's favorite activities and happy behaviors as a guide. How many bad days in a row would indicate a diminished quality of life?

Combining medical information and well-being parameters, you or your [veterinarian](#) might initiate discussion about euthanasia. End-of-life discussions can help clarify your wishes, ease decision-making and ultimately may help you cope with the loss of a pet.

Following a [pet](#)'s death, grieving is a normal response to this change and loss. This process is unique for each individual, and may last for some time. It may be helpful to spend more time on your own reflecting on memories, or it may be helpful to reach out to friends, family or professionals for support.

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