

When to say goodbye? Survey sheds light on difficult decisions for dog owners

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Deciding when it's time to say goodbye to a beloved furry friend is never easy, even when the animal in question may be suffering from low quality of life due to age or illness. The question for many dog owners

remains—how do you know when it's time?

Questions like this led members of the Dog Aging Project to conduct a survey of 2,570 dog owners inquiring about the circumstances of their companion dog's death, including the cause of death, whether euthanasia was involved, the reason euthanasia may have been chosen, and what medical symptoms, age characteristics and quality of life the animal had prior to death.

The findings are [published](#) in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*.

The Dog Aging Project is a collaborative, community scientist-driven data-gathering research project that enrolls companion dogs from all backgrounds to study the effects of aging and gain a better understanding of what contributes to a long and healthy canine life. Many of its research projects have led to studies that inform not only dog health but also human health.

Out of the owners who responded to this most recent survey, over 85% of those whose dogs had died reported choosing euthanasia; nearly half of those said they did so to relieve their pet's suffering. More than half of the total respondents also listed illness or disease as the actual cause of death.

"What this survey shows is that all dog owners struggle with deciding when it's time to say goodbye, and you're not alone if you're facing this decision," said Dr. Kellyn McNulty, an internal medicine resident in the Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences' (VMBS) Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences, who worked on the survey.

"As veterinarians, we encourage people to consider not just the 'lifespan'

of a companion animal, but also the 'health span'—the portion of your dog's life when they're in good health," she said. "Advocating for your pet is about more than helping them live longer—it's also about making sure that the time they have here on Earth is a good time."

Why age isn't always a factor

Curiously, one aspect of dog health that was not a significant contributor to whether euthanasia was chosen was dog age.

"One of the most interesting things that we learned from the survey was that euthanasia isn't something that primarily affects older dogs," McNulty said. "Some illnesses and diseases can affect younger dogs, which can lower their quality of life and lead owners to wonder whether it might be time to say goodbye sooner rather than later."

"It's not a decision that anyone wants to have to make, but the survey showed us that many pet owners face these questions regardless of how old their dog is," she said.

However, as [veterinary medicine](#) continues to improve at treating and managing [chronic illnesses](#), age may come to play a more significant role in determining quality of life.

"One thing dog owners can do is be on the lookout for the signs of aging so they can work with their veterinarian to assess whether age or chronic illness is causing quality of life to change," McNulty said. "If your dog is well-trained and potty-trained and begins soiling the house, that's a possible sign. Others include restlessness at night, new onset anxiety and fears, and arthritic issues."

No one is alone

The important thing for dog owners to keep in mind is that they're never alone when it comes to deciding whether to say goodbye. Not only are they in good company with other [dog owners](#) who are facing similar tough decisions, but they can always rely on their local veterinarian to provide expert advice.

"Taking your dog to the vet on a regular basis is critical for having a record of normal behavior and health statistics," McNulty said. "It's much easier to know what's abnormal for your dog if we have a long record of health information to look back on.

"We're also here to help you look out for your pet. Many of us are pet owners, too, and we understand how hard it can be to let go without thinking of it as giving up," she said.

The DAP is continuing to accept dogs of all breeds into the project. To date, more than 50,000 dogs have been enrolled. To enroll your dog, or learn more, visit dogagingproject.org.

More information: Elizabeth B. Pearson et al, Analysis of 2,570 responses to Dog Aging Project End of Life Survey demonstrates that euthanasia is associated with cause of death but not age, *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* (2023). [DOI: 10.2460/javma.23.07.0366](https://doi.org/10.2460/javma.23.07.0366)

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