**End of Life Care**

Coping with the impending loss of a pet is one of the most difficult experiences a pet parent will face. Whether your furry friend is approaching his golden years or has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, it’s important to calmly guide the end-of-life experience and minimize any discomfort or distress. As your pet’s health declines, you may elect to care for your pet at home—with the supervision of a veterinarian—or you may decide to end his suffering with euthanasia.

Read on to find out how to help make your pet’s final days peaceful and dignified.

**Is Your Pet In Pain?**

When cats and dogs are suffering, they may not show outward signs that we normally associate with pain like whimpering or crying. Sometimes an animal will continue to eat or drink in spite of pain or disorientation. Some physiological and behavioral signs that your pet might be experiencing pain include excessive panting or gasping for breath, reclusiveness, reluctance to move and food pickiness.

**Caring for an Elderly Pet**

The most important thing you can do for your elderly pet is to minimize any pain or distress she’s experiencing.

* Consult with your veterinarian and treat any health problems, since undiagnosed issues can cause discomfort and rapid deterioration.
* Surround her with her favorite things, like a warm blanket or special squeaky toy.
* Since pressure sores can develop in pets with limited mobility, it’s also essential to provide a warm sleeping spot with plenty of cushioning.
* Some older pets may develop incontinence, or the loss of bladder control, so be sure to check your furry friend regularly for any wetness or soiling. If your pet needs help getting up to urinate or defecate, you can purchase a sling or use a large towel to wrap under her body and assist her.

**Pet Hospice Care**

Pet hospice care, also known as palliative care, is an option if your pet is suffering from a terminal illness and a cure is not possible. The goal is to make a pet’s final days or weeks more pleasant with the proper use of pain medications, dietary strategies and human interaction. Pet hospice is not a place, but a personal choice and philosophy based on the principle that death is a part of life and can be dignified. When considering hospice care, pet parents should very careful not to prolong the suffering of pets who are in pain or experiencing poor quality of life.

A participating veterinarian will teach pet parents how to provide intensive home care to keep an ill pet as comfortable as possible. Hospice care requires an active commitment and constant supervision from pet parents, who work with their veterinary team to make sure their pet’s life ends comfortably. If you decide hospice care is the right course for you and your pet, you will become your pet’s primary nurse and caregiver, as well as the link between your pet and the veterinary team. Consult with your primary veterinarian and see if she recommends hospice care for your pet based on his specific needs.

**Considering Euthanasia**

Euthanasia provides a painless, peaceful end for a pet who would otherwise continue to suffer. Your veterinarian has special training to provide your pet with a humane and gentle death. During the procedure, your vet will inject your pet with a sedative followed by a special medication. The animal experiences no awareness of the end of life—the process is akin to undergoing general anesthesia for a surgical procedure and takes about 10 to 20 seconds.

Your veterinarian is the best person to advise you on when the time is right to euthanize—information from medical tests is often more accurate than what a pet owner can observe, and pet owners often delay the moment of euthanasia in anticipation of grief. Observing and keeping an accurate record of your pet in his daily activities can help you to decide. If you observe that moments of discomfort outweigh his capacity to enjoy life, it is time to euthanize, even if your pet still experiences pleasure in eating or socializing. If your pet is in pain, your main goal should be to minimize his suffering.

**What to Do If Your Pet Has Died at Home**

If your pet is under the care of a veterinarian at the time of his or her passing, he or she can guide you through next steps. However, if your pet dies in your home, there are options to consider. Whether you simply want the body to be removed from your home, or you wish to permanently memorialize your pet in some special way, the choice is yours.

* Depending on your decision, you may have to keep the body in your home for a short period of time. A well-cooled body can be held for up to 24 hours, but the sooner it can be taken somewhere else, the better.
* Placing the wrapped animal in a refrigerator or freezer is recommended, with one exception—if you plan to have a necropsy (autopsy) performed to determine cause of death, the body should not be frozen (refrigeration is still okay). It is essential that you contact a veterinarian as soon as possible if you would like a necropsy.
* If the animal is too big to be put into a refrigerator or freezer, the body should be placed on a cement floor or concrete slab, which is the best way to draw heat away from the carcass. Do not cover or wrap the body in this instance. Doing so will trap in heat and not allow the body temperature to cool.
* As a last resort, you may keep the body in the coldest area of your home, out of the sun, packed with bags of ice. In this case, the body should be placed in a plastic bag to prevent it from getting wet.

**Pet Cremation and Burial**

It is very common for pet owners to have their deceased pets cremated. You need to decide if you wish to keep your pet's ashes as a remembrance. If so, you will want to arrange an individual (or private) cremation, meaning that your pet will be cremated alone. Businesses that offer individual cremation commonly offer home pick-up/delivery of remains as part of their service packages.

Depending on local laws, it may be legal to bury an animal on your own property. It is typically illegal to bury an animal on public lands such as parks. If you desire burial for your pet but do not have land of your own, check to see if there is a pet cemetery or memorial park in your area.

**Other Options**

If you wish to simply have your pet’s body removed from your home, consult your local government to find out if your sanitation department picks up animal remains.