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WHEN IT IS TIME TO SAY A FINAL GOODBYE TO YOUR PET?

Dr. Kathryn Junkins Sarpong

Considering letting go of our fur babies because of suffering, end of life issues or other reasons can be heart wrenching and so difficult. How do you make this choice? What is euthanasia?

As veterinarians, we see this issue regularly. It is painful and a different journey for each family. Sometimes death comes after a prolonged gradual decline. Sometimes it is sudden and families are left reeling from confusion and shock. There are a few things that can help to prepare for this time that comes for every pet owner. Our fur babies do not have the lifespan of humans, so most people will have multiple generations of pets share their lives.

When there is a long illness, many times families are left wondering how to know when it is time to consider euthanasia. We may be praying that they will pass in their sleep, but we then face a difficult decision each day that does not happen. As a vet, I talk with families about each animal's personality and what brings them joy. We then look for those markers to be diminished or absent. Here is a list of questions to consider:

- Does your pet greet you or interact with you?
- Is your pet withdrawing from the family?
- Will your pet eat or only if force fed?
- Is there pain?
- Is there uncontrolled infection or an open wound?
- Is there incontinence leading to bed sores?
- What is the pet's mobility?
- Is breathing a struggle?
- Is there vomiting or diarrhea leading to dehydration?
- Can medication help significantly?
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Ask your veterinarian about needing guidance during these transitions. Your veterinarian will advocate to limit pain and suffering. Many diseases would have a very prolonged final chapter of suffering without the humane ability to say goodbye.

Euthanasia comes from the Greek words for good and death. The intent is to avoid suffering. Consider if you want a home euthanasia. Do you want the entire family there or do you want to say goodbye in another way? Do not be afraid to voice these wishes to your pet's care team. Consider how you would want to say goodbye and also memorialize your animal after they are gone. Maybe feed a special meal if they are still eating on the day of passing.

The typical euthanasia involves giving a sedative by an injection (like a vaccine), then 10-15 minutes of allowing the pet to relax. Then, a vein is prepared on a leg and a second injection is given into the vein that results in the pet passing. We use a barbiturate (anti-seizure medicine) in high doses for this so the brain loses consciousness prior to the heart stopping. There is no pain associated with euthanasia other than the injections.

All deceased animals at our clinic are cremated. Some families want the ashes from their fur baby or a clay paw impression, while others may want nothing but memories. Some of my clients desire a burial in the country (check local ordinances) and take the bodies of their fur baby home. Communicating your wishes and asking questions can help you have the good-bye you desire that honors your pet. Do not be afraid of your veterinary care team judging you. I have seen people that love their pet very much that do not want to be present in the final moments- your personal choices in these difficult times do not deserve to be criticized by those not involved. My heart is with you as you face these questions one day. It is the painful final act of love we give our pets to avoid unnecessary suffering. 