

Euthanasia

As pet owners we all take responsibility for the health and well-being of our pets throughout their lives. If a pet is suffering as a result of an incurable illness or if they have pain which can no longer be controlled with medication, an owner may need to consider euthanasia. This will enable your pet to die in peace with dignity and without further suffering.

Many of the staff at Acorn House have personal experience of losing a pet and understand that thinking about and arranging the euthanasia of a beloved pet is very difficult but it is one of the kindest things that an owner can do for a suffering pet.

Deciding when the time has come

Sometimes there is a sudden change in your pet's health that clearly indicates that euthanasia is the kindest option for your pet. In other cases, pets may deteriorate gradually with chronic illnesses and it is difficult to decide when the time is right. The vets and nurses at Acorn House are always happy to discuss your pet's individual circumstances with you. This can be done by arranging an appointment or requesting a telephone call from the practice during a quiet period when there is plenty of time to consider your pet's needs. The main considerations are:

- Is your pet comfortable?
- Does your pet still enjoy his/her favourite activities?
- Is your pet eating?

It is also important that everyone in the family feels that they have been involved in the decision. Veterinary staff can provide you with information and advice about your pet's condition and any suffering they are likely to experience. However, we will always respect your decision because nobody knows your pet better than you. Some clients find it helpful to make a "pet diary" in which they record details regarding positive behaviour such as eating, exercising, playing and negative behaviour such as coughing, vomiting, confusion, seizures, and difficulty moving to help them consider their pet's quality of life over time. A simpler version may involve considering whether each day has been a "good" or "bad" day for your pet overall, and checking that good days readily outnumber bad days over a given time period.

The veterinary surgeon may be able to prescribe additional pain relief or other drugs to alleviate your pet's suffering and give you more time to make your decision.

We also have experience with owners who have to consider euthanasia as a result of their dog's aggressive or dangerous behaviour and again will readily discuss individual cases.

What does the procedure involve?

Euthanasia of cats, dogs, rabbits and other small pets is performed using an anaesthetic drug known as pentobarbitone. This drug is very closely related to the drugs used in veterinary surgeries and hospitals to carry out general anaesthesia. This is why euthanasia is often referred to as "putting to sleep" because the drug initially sends the animal to sleep and then continues around the body to stop the heart beating.

In most cats and dogs the injection is given into a vein on a front leg. In rabbits, the ear vein is usually used. Some veterinary surgeons give the injection directly into the vein and others insert a small cannula into the vein first.

The pentobarbitone is injected into the vein over approximately 10 seconds. Within this time your pet will usually become very sleepy and floppy. The heart usually stops beating within 30-60 seconds.

Occasionally, if an animal has very low blood pressure, is very young or small or is uncomfortable with having his/her legs touched it may not be possible to give the injection into a leg vein. These animals may be given a sedative injection into the muscle on their necks or hindlegs and will become very sleepy over approximately 5 minutes. The veterinary surgeon will then inject the pentobarbitone directly into the abdominal cavity and the heart will gradually stop beating over the next few minutes. Guinea pigs and small rodents are also euthanased in this way, sometimes after breathing anaesthetic gas.

Can I stay with my pet?

We encourage owners to stay with their pets during euthanasia. If your veterinary surgeon prefers to insert a catheter into the leg prior to euthanasia, they may take your pet into the back of the hospital for the catheter to be inserted. Your pet will be returned to you within a few minutes with a small bandage covering the catheter. Once the catheter is in place, there is no requirement for a veterinary nurse to hold your pet for the euthanasia procedure and you will be supported to hold your pet on the table, floor or on your lap as you prefer whilst the vet administers the injection.

If the veterinary surgeon does not insert a catheter prior to euthanasia, it is more usual for the nurse to hold your pet when the injection is given as it is important that your pet does not suddenly move his/her leg.

It is entirely your decision whether to stay with your pet during euthanasia. It is comforting for many clients to reassure and speak to their pets right up to the end, and to see for themselves that their pet passed away peacefully. However, in other situations our clients decide that they do not want to be present during euthanasia – it is a very personal choice. In these cases our nurses will hold your pet and speak to them/ fuss them as the vet administers the injection. If you ask us to euthanise your pet without being present yourself, the procedure will take place immediately following your request.

If you are having a small pet such as a hamster put to sleep then unfortunately we are not able to have you present whilst we administer the anaesthetic gas due to health and safety reasons.

Is euthanasia painful?

No. The sensation experienced by your pet should be exactly the same as when humans are given a general anaesthetic – they should just drift out of consciousness.

What happens after euthanasia?

In most cases, your pet will simply go to sleep and not wake up. Your pet's eyes will stay open. This is because the anaesthetic drug relaxes the muscles of the eyelids.

Occasionally, as your pet falls asleep they may make a noise, snore, stretch out or breathe heavily.

Animals with certain lung, heart or digestive conditions may pass fluid from the mouth or nose after death. Sometimes urine or faeces are passed as the muscles of the bladder and bowel relax. There may be tiny ripple movements of the skin for a minute or so after death – this is a normal muscle response. If you stroke your pet's chest after death, air may be pushed out of your pet's mouth and look as if your pet is taking a breath. This is not a conscious movement and is nothing to worry about.

The vet will listen to your pet's heart and check for eye reflexes and breathing effort before confirming that death has occurred.

You are encouraged to spend some time with your pet after euthanasia. This can be with the vet present, or on your own. Family members that may not have wished to be present during the euthanasia process may wish to return to the consult room and spend some time with their pet at this point. Please let us know what you would prefer.

Euthanasia at home

It is possible for the veterinary surgeon and nurse to make a home visit to perform euthanasia. This may offer the advantage of a more private experience in a familiar environment for both the pet and the family.

Home visits are usually made between 11am and 4pm on weekdays and we are always grateful for advance notice so that we can arrange our appointments and other visits around your request.

Euthanasia can be performed in the house or in the garden, as you prefer. However, a reasonable level of lighting is needed for the vet to carry out the procedure.

Aftercare

Whether euthanasia is carried out at home or at the surgery, you will have a number of choices regarding aftercare. It is often easier to talk and think about these choices well in advance. The options are as follows:

Cremation

There are several Pet Crematoria in and around Bedfordshire. Your pet can be cremated individually and the ashes returned to you either to keep or to scatter at a favourite spot or on a much-loved walk. Alternatively, your pet can be cremated with other pets. It is not possible to return ashes if a communal cremation is requested.

Acorn House uses Pet Cremation Services at West Lodge Farm in Northamptonshire. This crematorium service will collect your pet from the surgery and return the ashes to the surgery for collection approximately one week later. This pet crematorium has an excellent and informative website at www.pcsonline.org.uk. It is also possible to visit the crematorium, spend time with your pet in the chapel of rest at the crematorium, or take your pet to the crematorium yourself if you prefer.

Pets that are cremated communally have their ashes interred in the memorial garden at the crematorium.

Clients selecting an individual cremation will be asked to choose how their pet's ashes are returned to them.

If you advise us that you would like the ashes returned so that you can scatter them, these will be returned in a pretty cardboard 'scatter tube'. When you have found the perfect time and place, a perforated section allows you to open the tube to scatter the ashes.

If you would prefer to keep the ashes, the ashes can be returned to you in a memory box (which has a compartment for the ashes and another compartment for momentos and photographs to be stored); a wooden casket with your pet's name on an engraved nameplate; or a pebble-shaped urn which also has an engraved nameplate.

We are also able to offer the ashes returned in a wooden casket in a 'sleeping cat' design (cats); or in a slate and silver design urn with a pawprint motif.

Alternatively, you may wish to make a private arrangement with one of the other local Pet Crematoria. Bedford Pet Crematorium is based in Thurleigh. This is a one-person business offering a local and bespoke service - Mike is often able to collect your pet's body from your home or from our practice. Cambridge Pet Crematorium do not usually collect from our practice, but it would be possible to take your pet yourself. Details are as follows:

- Cambridge Pet Crematorium (01763 207700); www.cpccares.com (It is also possible to attend your pet's cremation at this crematorium if you prefer)
- Bedford Pet Cremations (01234 363443), Thurleigh; www.bedford-pet-cremations.co.uk

Burial

Some owners prefer to bury their pet's body in the garden at home. It can be comforting to have your pet at home. However, do bear in mind that it is recommended that graves are at least 1.25 metres in depth to prevent disturbance of the grave by wildlife, and digging a grave of this size can be physically demanding particularly in very dry or cold conditions. Pets may be wrapped in a blanket before burial but avoid using plastic bags as these prevent the body from degrading naturally. Burial is only possible on your own land and away from any water course.

Losing and grieving for a pet that has been part of your family and lived with you through important times and changes in your life can be a very sad and difficult experience. The nurses, vets and receptionists at Acorn House understand this and are available to talk things over with you.

The Blue Cross operates a free of charge Pet Bereavement Support Service on 0800 0966606 (8:30am – 8:30pm every day) or by email on pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk.

Petsavers have information that can be located at www.petsavers.org.uk/index.php/resources/pet-bereavement and produce a leaflet that can be obtained from Acorn House reception.

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