

Euthanasia

When to say good-bye

This is the hardest part of owning a geriatric dog. Most dogs and cats are euthanized, as a “natural death” is often very drawn-out and painful, while euthanasia is a very peaceful process. However, this does require a decision to be made. Exactly when the “right” time is for your pet is a very personal decision that will depend on your family’s needs. Some pet owners want to know that they did everything they can, while others want to make sure they did not feel in the end that they waited too long or pushed their pet too far. If your pet is not eating, this needs to be addressed, or euthanasia must be considered. Similarly if your pet cannot rest or move around comfortably and this cannot be fixed, euthanasia should be considered. Dr. Alice Villalobos devised the following scale to help pet owners determine their pet’s quality of life:

Quality of Life Scale: The HHHHMM Scale	
Pet caregivers can use this Quality of Life Scale to determine the success of pawspice care. Score patients using a scale of 1 to 10.	
Score	Criterion
1-10	HURT - Adequate pain control, including breathing ability, is first and foremost on the scale. Is the pet’s pain successfully managed? Is oxygen necessary?
1-10	HUNGER - Is the pet eating enough? Does hand feeding help? Does the patient require a feeding tube?
1-10	HYDRATION - Is the patient dehydrated? For patients not drinking enough, use subcutaneous fluids once or twice daily to supplement fluid intake.
1-10	HYGIENE - The patient should be brushed and cleaned, particularly after elimination. Avoid pressure sores and keep all wounds clean.
1-10	HAPPINESS - Does the pet express joy and interest? Is the pet responsive to things around him or her (family, toys, etc.)? Is the pet depressed, lonely, anxious, bored or afraid? Can the pet’s bed be close to the family activities and not be isolated?
1-10	MOBILITY - Can the patient get up without assistance? Does the pet need human or mechanical help (e.g., a cart)? Does the pet feel like going for a walk? Is the pet having seizures or stumbling? (Some caregivers feel euthanasia is preferable to amputation, yet an animal who has limited mobility but is still alert and responsive can have a good quality of life as long as caregivers are committed to helping the pet.)
1-10	MORE GOOD DAYS THAN BAD - When bad days outnumber good days, quality of life might be compromised. When a healthy human-animal bond is no longer possible, the caregiver must be made aware the end is near. The decision needs to be made if the pet is suffering. If death comes peacefully and painlessly, that is okay.
*TOTAL	*A total over 35 points represents acceptable life quality

Other tools such as listing your pet’s 5 favorite things and keeping a diary noting how many of these things they still have interest in day-to-day, or keeping a “good day” vs. “bad day” jars and putting a marble in one or the other each day, can be objective ways to determine if it is your pet’s “time”, however in some cases there is no way to make this decision an easy one.

It is important to keep in mind that your quality of life is important, too: if caring for an elderly or special-needs pet is taking its toll on you, that is okay!

Many veterinarians are reluctant to bring up euthanasia until you do, as they do not want to upset you if you are not yet considering this. The veterinarians at La Costa Animal Hospital are here to counsel you through this difficult time and help you come to a decision that you and your family will be comfortable with.

What to expect

Once it comes time, the Drs. Schatzle or Meisner can come to your home to euthanize your pet, or this can be performed at our hospital. Euthanasia must be performed intravenously; at La Costa Animal Hospital, we place an IV catheter rather than giving euthanasia directly via needle into the vein. This is because a needle can slip from the vein while an IV catheter is secure, and if

any euthanasia solution (pentobarbital) is given outside of the vein this is very painful. In addition to this, we place a short extension tube on your pet's IV catheter so that you may cuddle him or her while we give the solution from the end of this tube.

You and your pet will be brought into a comfortable private room where you can say goodbye to your pet. Your dog or cat will be taken into our treatment area for placement of the IV catheter, while you select a cremation option and sign paperwork to indicate that you consent to euthanasia. The payment transaction is done prior to the procedure, so that you do not have to tearfully sign checks or credit card slips following the emotional height of the procedure. You should let your veterinarian know at this point if you would like a lock of hair or your pet's collar as a keepsake.

If you wish to be present for the euthanasia, your dog or cat will be returned to you with the IV catheter in place. You will then be given as much private time as you need to say goodbye to your pet. When you are ready, Dr. Schatzle or Dr. Meisner will come back into your room and administer the euthanasia solution. Usually death comes within seconds of the injection. The veterinarians at La Costa Animal Hospital do not give sedative prior to the euthanasia, because in our experience all this achieves is prolonging the time to death. Euthanasia solution will anesthetize your pet before it stops the heart, so your pet will effectively be sedated prior to passing, anyways. Most pets pass very peacefully, though rarely do they close their eyes. Many will urinate or defecate after the procedure.