

When is the Right Time?

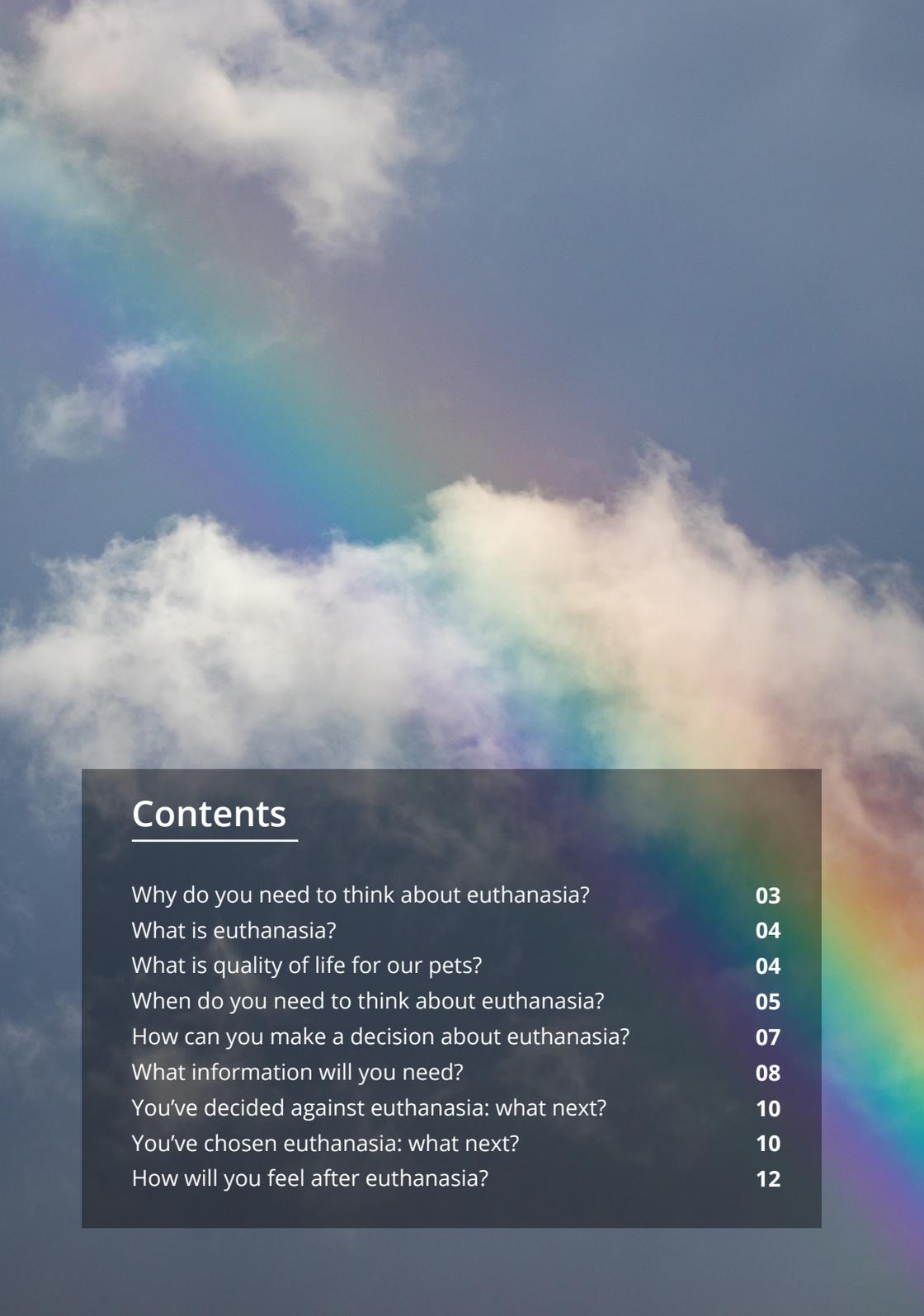


Sometimes, euthanasia can be the right thing to do for your pet.

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SCOTTISH SPCA
Scotland's Animal Welfare Charity



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Why do you need to think about euthanasia?

When we take a companion animal, a pet, into our home, we expect that they will be with us for their whole life. A pet may become a treasured friend – even our best friend – and is often considered to be part of the family. We are responsible for our pet's welfare, and have a duty to make sure that they have a good quality of life, however long or short that may be. At some stage in a pet's life we will almost certainly need to consult a vet and decide on the best choice of veterinary treatment, and ultimately one of those choices may be euthanasia. We have a responsibility to make that difficult choice. **Remember, not making a decision is still a decision.**



What is euthanasia?

Euthanasia of our pets usually involves an overdose of anaesthetic, given by injection, which quickly causes unconsciousness and then death. Euthanasia can offer a good and painless death for our pets when the time is right. What more could we hope for, for the pets we love?

What is quality of life for our pets?

A good quality of life for us means a life that makes us happy. Experts in animal welfare believe that the same is true for our pets – quality of life for animals is all about how they feel. A good quality of life for a pet is more than just not being in pain. Just as for us, a happy pet will be able to enjoy his food and chosen activities, feel safe and comfortable, and perhaps enjoy company, affection, and attention.

Pets are different from people in that they live more in the moment than we do. While they may look forward to the usual mealtimes or walk times – and sometimes be fearful when they arrive at the vet's – they may be unable to look further ahead than that. This means that some things may be worse for our pets than for us: pets don't know that the unpleasant effects of veterinary treatment are temporary and when it's over they might have a longer and better quality of life. And some things may be worse for us than for our pet: a diagnosis of terminal disease is devastating for a person, but fortunately an animal can't look so far ahead and won't be afraid for the future or sad not to have one. Similarly, our pets' tendency to live in the moment is likely to mean they won't dwell on past trauma, as we tend to do. When making decisions for our pets, it is important to think hard about what matters to the pet – what matters now – and how much it matters.

When do you need to think about euthanasia?

Most animals have a much shorter life span than people, so we will all probably be faced with difficult life and death decisions for our pets. These decisions might be made at the end of a long life, or sooner than that if an illness or injury, or its treatment, causes too much suffering. You will probably need to think about euthanasia at some stage in your pet's life – it's a question of 'when', not 'if'. This may be at an unexpected and upsetting time, when making decisions is challenging. It is therefore important to think about euthanasia some time before you need to make such difficult decisions.

In old age

With old age, your pet may gradually become confused or anxious, or may lose interest in food or in other things that used to give your pet pleasure. These are signs of worsening quality of life and should not be accepted as just part of growing old. Some of these changes may respond to veterinary treatment or to lifestyle adjustments (such as shorter walks, softer food, etc) and you will naturally want to do what you can for your pet. However, when an old animal friend becomes injured or seriously ill, it is worth considering carefully whether you should subject your pet to stressful, unpleasant and even painful treatments, especially if the treatments are prolonged, when your pet's natural lifespan is already limited. Instead, the kindest and most appropriate action might be to give your good friend a good death. That is, to prioritise the quality, over the quantity, of life.

We might wish that our aged pets would die in their sleep, but this rarely happens. In any case, a natural death can involve suffering so sooner or later it is likely that you will have to consider the decision to give your animal companion a painless death. This is an unusual and hard decision to have to make. When your pet is near the end of life and you are considering euthanasia, ask yourself how certain you are that your pet will enjoy the extra time provided by delaying euthanasia. If not, then choosing to end suffering may be the last kindness you can offer your pet, and it's better to make that decision a little early than too late.

At any age

Our pets can suffer injury or illness at any age, and now there are many more treatment options than there were before. In many cases the surgical and drug treatments available to our pets are as advanced as those available for people, and that can be a very good thing but it can also cause problems. With more of us taking out insurance for our pets, even very expensive treatment options may be affordable. However, just because something can be done, and can be afforded, that doesn't mean that it is always in the best interests of our pets.

In the UK, doctors are not allowed to perform active euthanasia no matter how much a person is suffering. On the other hand, vets can and will offer euthanasia as a positive choice in many circumstances throughout a pet's life, when quality of life is poor and suffering simply cannot be relieved, or when the treatment would itself cause significant suffering for very limited benefit. Treatments might cause pain, distress, anxiety or other negative emotional or physical effects. These might be severe but short-lived or might go on for many months.

Vets are obliged to tell their clients about all reasonable treatment options, even those they would not necessarily recommend. With the best of intentions, we may consider advanced diagnostic tests and treatments which might not be in the best interest of our pets. Even simple tests may require a pet to be removed from home and family and confined to a cage in a clinic to allow tests to be carried out – this can be stressful and frightening for the pet, and distressing for the family. Even if we know exactly what the trouble is, and there are affordable treatment options available to us, it might still be right to decide not to go ahead with invasive treatments if these might cause too much suffering.

It is critical that decisions about the best choice of treatment (including euthanasia), focus on what is likely to matter to your pet and how much it matters. When your pet's quality of life is very poor, you have the option and advantage of being able to give the gift of a painless, easy death rather than other treatments that might cause their own kinds of suffering. Making such treatment decisions can be difficult: the advice that follows here should help you to make them.

How can you make a decision about euthanasia?

One very important difference between us and our pets is that we can make important decisions for ourselves. Our pets can't do that, and so we must make important decisions for them. We are not used to making life and death decisions about those we care for. It is often very difficult to do, but there are good ways of making such decisions. Throughout your pet's life, having the knowledge and tools to make good decisions will help to ensure that you give your pet a life that is as happy as possible, however long or short it may be.

Just as when making decisions for yourself, you need to find out the facts and weigh up the pros and cons, thinking carefully about what matters to your pet, and how much it matters. While your pet's welfare should be your top priority, making good decisions might mean you need to think about the effects on others too. Whenever such a decision is needed, your vet should be one useful source of information about the disease and treatments. Your vet will be keen to make sure that you are able to make an informed decision in partnership with them, and they will also be able to help you evaluate your pet's quality of life. Vets know how difficult such end-of-life decisions can be, and will want you to be as confident as you can be that you have made the right choice for your pet.



What information will you need?

What should you ask vet?

When the time comes, here are some questions to ask about all of the options, which will give you the information that you need to make a good decision.

What are all the tests and treatment options (including euthanasia)?

For each option ask:

What exactly happens?

Where does it happen (animal hospital inpatient/ animal hospital outpatient/ own vet's/ at home)?

What suffering might it involve (pain/ distress/ anxiety/ boredom/ frustration)?

How long will it last?

What are the possible complications or side effects, and how likely are they?

What will be my pet's quality of life after treatment – how good could it be, and how certain is this?

What will be my pet's quantity of life after treatment – how many weeks, months or years, and how certain is this?

What will I need to be able to do for my pet during/ after treatment (cost, care, accommodation, transport, etc)?

What will it cost, and what will be covered by any insurance held?

Now that you have those facts, you need to think about what these mean for your pet and perhaps also for you and other members of the family.

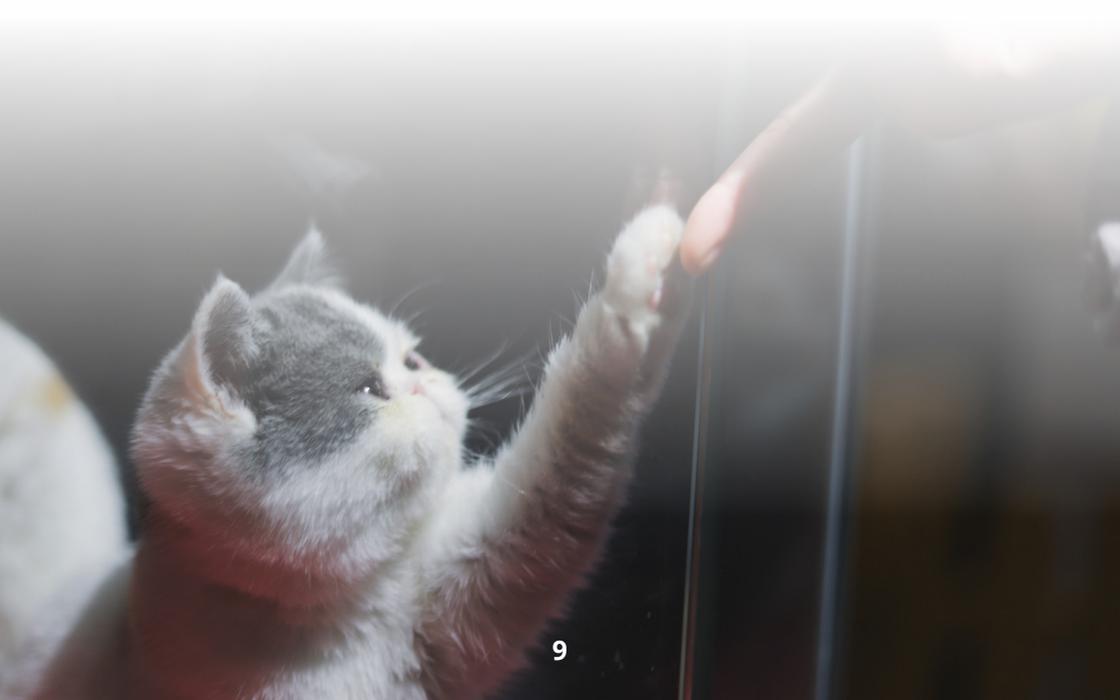
What should you ask yourself?

Once you have the information you need, compare each treatment option with euthanasia, and ask yourself:

What will be best for my pet (thinking always about what matters to your pet, and how much it matters)?

How will this affect me and others, and how well will I (and others) be able to cope with this? Impacts could be financial, physical and emotional. Think also about what help may be available to you.

Once you have gathered your thoughts in this way, you should discuss your thinking with your vet and together arrive at your decision on the best option for your pet in the circumstances.



You've decided against euthanasia: what next?

If you decide on a life-prolonging treatment with possible negative impacts or some risk of failure, you need to keep thinking about what is best for your pet during that treatment and be prepared to make a new decision at any time. It can be useful to set some rules for decision-making during treatment, and remain flexible. Sometimes the decision to choose euthanasia once initial treatment has started can be the most difficult one, but may still be the right thing to do.

You've chosen euthanasia: what next?

You've made the decision that euthanasia is the kindest treatment. But when should it happen, and where, and who should be there, and what will happen afterwards? How can you best explain your decision to other family members? Your vet can help you to answer these questions and more.

If your pet can be kept comfortable for a while it may be possible to delay euthanasia if there are important reasons for this. For example, other very stressful events – such as critical illness or family bereavement – might make your pet's euthanasia more difficult to deal with. If not, for your pet's sake it will almost always be better not to delay.

Although usually more expensive, it can be less traumatic for both animal and owner if a planned euthanasia can be performed at home. On the other hand, if the animal is already in hospital or at the vet clinic, moving back home may be additionally stressful.

It is best if you or another family member can be there to reassure your pet, but if you can't control your distress this might upset your pet and so it might be better not to be present. In fact, euthanasia causes death so peacefully that witnessing it can be less upsetting than you might imagine and can even provide some comfort. Even if you don't want to be there at the time, you might still want to spend a little time with your pet afterwards.



How will you feel after euthanasia?

It is natural to experience grief when losing a pet. A well-recognised aspect of grieving is guilt, and our sense of responsibility for our animals often leads to quite profound feelings of guilt following euthanasia. It is important to know that even if we have made the right decision for our pet, we might still feel guilty. We say things like:

'Maybe we shouldn't have tried to extend her life which increased her suffering.'

'Maybe we shouldn't have euthanized him so soon - we should have given him a chance.'

'Maybe we didn't do all we could for her, after all her years of devotion to us.'

These are all very natural reactions following euthanasia: feeling guilty is natural even when you have done the right thing. Because you have thought carefully about what is in the best interests of your pet, you can be much more confident about the decision you made.

We hope that these ideas will help you to understand that euthanasia can be a positive choice for your pet in some circumstances. Deciding to euthanize your much-loved pet may be one of the hardest decisions you will need to make but may be the greatest gift you can give. When you take the decision to end your pet's life for all the right reasons, having carefully considered all the options, then you can be reassured that your pet's lifelong trust in you was very well placed.





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