

## ASK DR. DOG

### Grappling with a "Good Death"

By Erin Adkins, DVM

Dear Dr. Dog: My dog is getting well on in years and is pretty feeble. I dread the idea of having her "put to sleep" when her quality of life gets really bad. How do you counsel your patients when they're facing this awful decision?

The term euthanasia literally means "good death." When done in an appropriate manner, it is just that: a painless, peaceful, and controlled process that can put an end to or prevent your pet's suffering. The process leading up to euthanasia, however, is one of the most difficult a pet owner will ever face, often fraught with feelings of guilt and anxiety.

Veterinarians and pet owners alike would prefer for beloved animal companions to pass away peacefully in their sleep, but sadly this rarely happens. In most cases, we must wield the formidable power of life and death. Although this is an awesome responsibility, trusting in your compassion and loving instincts will guide you to make the right choice at the right time.

As you mentioned, most people feel that it is the quality of an animal's life that matters most, not the quantity of her days. To determine your dog's quality of life, first assess whether she can meet her basic needs. Is she free of hunger, thirst, and pain; breathing and moving around without duress; and able to control her bladder and bowels? Make a list of your dog's favorite activities, such as sleeping with you in bed, chasing squirrels in the backyard, or exploring the kitchen floor for tasty morsels. Evaluate whether or not she is still able to enjoy such simple canine pleasures.

Does she still engage with you and others in positive ways? Interactions with your pet ideally should not be limited to administering medications or other therapies, as can sometimes happen during the treatment of complex illnesses. Some of these factors may be mitigated by others (for example, a dog may be incontinent but still able to move around and keep himself clean, or a dog may enjoy taking his pills in treats), so try to look at the big picture. It can be helpful to consult with a family member or veterinary professional who knows your dog well and whose evaluation of your pet may be less clouded by emotion.

While declining quality of life is the most important medical reason for euthanasia, other factors frequently come into play. Often elderly dogs who are "slowing down" are actually suffering from arthritis or systemic illnesses, and the prognoses and treatment options for these maladies are important to discuss with your veterinarian. While it is impossible for medical professionals to predict exactly how long an animal or a person will live, they can estimate the chance for recovery. If your pet has a progressive condition, meaning that it will only get worse and create more suffering for the animal

over time, euthanasia might be considered sooner than if she has a condition that responds well to treatment.

Tragically, in today's economy, financial considerations often weigh heavily in a pet owner's decision to euthanize. As doctors, we wish that the treatment decisions for our patients were governed only by medical factors, but we understand that this is not always realistic. Veterinary care can certainly be expensive, and there is no shame in ending your pet's suffering if you cannot afford the care she needs and can find no one else to help out. How much money to spend on a seriously sick pet is a highly personal decision.

Once you have made the difficult decision, there are some final details to sort out. First, do you wish to take your dog into the vet clinic or find a doctor who makes house calls? In either case, the vet will ask you if you want to be present for the procedure. Some people find witnessing their pet's death therapeutic, while others prefer to say goodbye beforehand.

Another aspect to consider ahead of time is what to do with the remains. You may take possession of the body, but be aware that burying animals in the backyard is technically illegal in many places. Sometimes the best option is cremation, in which case you may ask for your pet's ashes or have them professionally disposed of.

After the loss of a pet, it is important to let yourself fully grieve. Ignore people who tell you to get over it because it was "only" a dog. Our dogs are important family members and need to be mourned as such. Take a personal day or two to spend time with your other pets, if you have them. Get support from friends or relatives who understand the significance of your relationship with your canine companion. Remind yourself of the wonderful life you have shared with your beloved friend, and remember that providing her with a peaceful and pain-free death was the ultimate act of love.

If you are having trouble coping with the loss, there are many resources that can help, including books, support groups, and pet loss hotlines. The San Francisco SPCA's website provides links to many such services in the Bay Area at [www.sfspca.org/programs-services/pet-loss-support](http://www.sfspca.org/programs-services/pet-loss-support).

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Erin Adkins, DVM, is an intern at San Francisco Veterinary Specialists ([www.sfvs.net](http://www.sfvs.net)). She lives in the city with her feline companions, Mikey and Delilah, and looks forward to finding a canine companion once her internship training is finished. Prior to veterinary school, she worked at a New York City veterinary hospital that provided hospice care and grief counseling, where she was inspired by the courage of the pets and owners she met.