

Euthanasia and Your Pet- An Introduction

Probably one of the most heartbreaking, complex and difficult decisions a pet-lover faces is deciding whether and when to euthanize a beloved animal companion. Euthanasia is the Greek word for “good death” and is a merciful, compassionate and humane way of ending a life of terminal pain and suffering, a life of little quality. It offers the pet a painless and dignified death. Your veterinarian painlessly injects a massive dose of sedative or barbiturate intravenously – first to relax and sedate the pet; secondly to stop the heart while the pet is asleep. The pet’s suffering is terminated and the animal slips off first into a peaceful sleep and then death. The decision is NEVER easy and should involve careful thought, soul-searching and deliberation. It is important for you, as your pet’s “guardian” or “parent” that you research and contemplate the subject long before the need actually arises. Also it is advisable to consult your veterinarian and perhaps others (including other animal lovers and experts as well as members of the clergy) to determine whether euthanasia is the kindest and most appropriate response to your pet’s condition.

From the moment one adopts an animal companion, one must regard this adoption as a lifelong commitment and relationship and be aware that the pet (like its human counterpart) will evolve from infancy to adolescence to adulthood to maturity or middle age, and then, ultimately old age. From the beginning of our relationship to this wonderful, sentient friend, companion and beloved family member, we must understand that life is arbitrary and that loss is inevitable and that our pet’s death will eventually occur whether by means of accident, illness or simply old age. We must be prepared to love and nurture him throughout his entire life and provide the best and highest quality of care we can throughout sickness and in health.

We must prepare ourselves for the probability that we will outlive our pets and for the possibility that our pets may become ill, infirm, disabled or victims of diseases such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, osteoarthritis, etc. We must understand the painful truth that we can take nothing for granted! Just as human beings succumb to accidents and unanticipated health problems so do our animal companions.

Sometimes we are fortunate enough to enjoy the joyous and comforting companionship of our pets for many years (some dogs and cats can live up to 20 years). In other situations, we enjoy their presence for only for a brief time (weeks, months or only several years). It is frequently said that we merely “borrow” these unconditionally loving and devoted creatures that so deeply and profoundly enrich and ennoble our lives. And, yet, how unwilling and unprepared are we to return them from whence they come!

Making the conscious, deliberate decision to end another creature’s life is assuredly one of the hardest and most painful we will ever make. Yet, it is a means of alleviating the suffering of one we dearly love and is a painless, compassionate response to unnecessary suffering and agony.

In the next article on euthanasia, we will discuss if and when it is appropriate and when it is

advisable to help our beloved animal companions by eliminating their suffering. In addition, we will attempt to clear up many of the myths, misconceptions and fallacies surrounding euthanasia.

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