

Is it time to put my dog or cat to sleep?

When is the right time?

When is the right time to put your dog or cat to sleep? Many people struggle with knowing how and when to make that final decision. Typically, when owners or family members start bringing this question up it means they are starting to see their pet's health declining and want to make sure they are prepared. We never want to see our pet companions in pain, yet struggle with whether to hold onto them a little longer or if it is truly time to say farewell.

When you notice more bad days for your pet, it's time to have a family discussion. Take this time to talk about each family member's feelings, and also the physical or emotional toll your pet's health status is having on everyone, including your pet. Allow each family member to voice their feelings or concerns, including any children that are mature enough to handle the impending reality. Weighing the pros and cons and evaluating everyone's points will help guide you to figure out the best course of action for your pet.

Talk to your vet:

Have a discussion with your veterinarian, and get a second opinion if you feel it is necessary. Veterinarians have seen many pets and many cases in their careers and can give valuable guidance. They are informed and objective and will advise you on the degree of pain or suffering that the pet is experiencing or is expected to experience in the future. This is useful advice for decision making because your veterinarian is informed, experienced and a professional source. They are not clouded with the same degree of grief or emotion that you are experiencing.

If you are not yet ready to say goodbye, your veterinarian can prescribe pain medication and give advice on how to make your pet comfortable until it is their time. He or she can also walk you through the process and explain step by step what to expect when the procedure is performed.

Evaluate the quality of life:

A tricky term many people use to discuss end of life care is "quality of life". This is always subjective and can apply to many facets of a pet's life. When evaluating your pet's daily life think about not just physical health, but their mental health as well. If your pet rarely eats, is sick all the time, exhibits significant weight loss, is in constant pain, can't stand, has incontinence, or has more bad days than good days, it is apparent that their quality of life is poor. If your pet seems to be eating fine but is suffering from constant mental anguish such as separation anxiety, or is coping with blindness, that may also be considered a poor quality of life.

Don't let guilt in:

You shouldn't feel ashamed or guilty if you find yourself wondering if it is time to have them euthanized. Pets are very important members of our families, and our bonds with them are incredibly strong. A large part of our daily life revolves around feeding, playing with, cuddling and caring for them. Often, we come to rely on their presence like other humans in our lives. We need them and it is hard to say goodbye. But this should not be a reason we keep an ailing pet alive. When we realize that we are causing them to suffer then we can agree to the act of extreme self-sacrifice and mercy and allow them to pass peacefully.

Should they pass on their own?

You may wonder if it is better to let your cat or dog pass on their own at home? Usually, we are asked this by owners who are struggling with the decision to euthanize. The burden of making these decisions can be very emotional and difficult to think about. You may be holding out for the chance that the pet will die in its sleep so that you are relieved of that burden. Eventually, each pet will pass and many do so while their owner is sleeping or at work.

This does not always mean that your pet felt no pain. Death is not always swift, and surely not always painless. Some forms of death can be very uncomfortable and even distressing, such as heart and respiratory failure. These forms of death may take hours, much longer than a loving owner would want to see them suffer. Euthanasia is a humane way to avoid this suffering.

Final thoughts:

You are your pet's caretaker and ultimately it is your responsibility to decide if it is time to end their suffering. Keeping a written log of your pet's good days and bad days may help you see how they are doing overall over a period of time. Are they having more bad days than good? Are they still able to do their favorite activities? Is your chowhound becoming less and less interested in their meals? When you notice a downward trend in their overall behavior and enjoyment out of life, it likely means the end is near.

Take time to enjoy your time with them and comfort in being able to relieve their discomfort. Once you and your family members are at peace with your decision decide how you want to spend your remaining time with your pet. Take a few days to spoil their pet, and tell them how much they love them. When the time comes to say farewell, we will be there to handle the rest.

