



Saying goodbye



# When it's time to say goodbye

Making the decision to say goodbye to a beloved family pet is a heartbreaking and emotionally taxing prospect, and dealing with the loss can lead to feelings of sadness, guilt, and anger. Every relationship between an owner and their pet is different and the mixture of feelings we experience will be different from person to person.

We understand how painful this can be. It is hard for our team too, as we get to know many of our clients' pets and their personalities. We have a programme of bereavement training for our team so that we can help you through this difficult time. Although at times this guide may be difficult for you to read, it is much better for you to know what is involved so that you can make informed and educated decisions in advance.



# Making the decision

Nobody wants to make the decision to have their pet put to sleep, but your pet's quality of life must be the primary consideration. The best person to advise you on your pet's health is your vet. They will be able to let you know if your pet's condition will deteriorate over time and whether they are suffering.

Our vets are here to help and can support you by discussing the situation and answering any questions you may have. Please just book an appointment and let the receptionist know that you want to discuss making an end of life decision. We will then allow extra time for your appointment. Our vets will speak with you honestly and present all the facts to help you make a decision. At no time will we pressure you into making a decision earlier than you are comfortable with, but we will always be honest with you if your pet is suffering.

When you have made the decision to say goodbye there are several things that it may help to consider in advance.

If you are coming into the practice, please let our reception team know what the visit is for and ask them to pick a quieter time of day. On the day, you may wish to stay in your car until the vet is ready to see you rather than sitting in the waiting room. This is fine. Telephone us to let us know when you arrive, and we will come out to get you when we are ready.

It is up to you whether you want to stay with your pet through the euthanasia procedure.

For a lot of people, it gives them comfort to see that their pet's passing was peaceful and to know that they were at their pet's side until the end.

For others the situation is just too distressing, and they would prefer to just remember the good times. If you choose not to be with your pet at this time, one of our nurses will cuddle and talk soothingly to your pet during the process.

We are often asked whether children should be present during the procedure. We really can't answer this because it depends on the age and maturity of your children and the relationship they have with your pet. Please let us know in advance if you are bringing any children with you.

The last thing we want is to compound an owner's stress by making you stand at a reception desk to pay a bill. We also find that clients do not like receiving an invoice in the post some days later, as it brings back all the raw emotion and grief. For these reasons we would always advise that you pay in advance, so that you can leave quietly after your appointment. We can take card payments over the telephone.



# The euthanasia procedure

We understand that saying goodbye to a pet can be heartbreaking, but taking a little time to prepare for the event in advance may help.

You will be asked to fill out a euthanasia consent form and we will talk to you about the options after euthanasia.

During the procedure you will be in the room with a vet and a veterinary nurse. You may wish to bring a blanket or bed for your pet to sit on. Large dogs will often stay on the floor, with the vet coming down to their level for the procedure. Smaller dogs or cats often sit on their bed or a blanket on the consulting table.

The euthanasia itself involves an overdose of anaesthetic drug into your pet's vein. Depending on your pet's individual needs, a cannula may be placed into their vein first. A cannula is a thin tube that is inserted into the vein through which the drug is administered. The veterinary team may wish to take your pet into the preparation room, where they have all the equipment to hand to shave your pet's leg and insert the cannula. They will then bring your pet straight back to you so you can be with them for the euthanasia. In some cases, your vet may feel able to administer the drug by direct injection into a vein without a cannula. This is very much down to your vet and your pet's individual situation.



Some pets may require sedation prior to the euthanasia, for example if they are very distressed or if it is too painful for the veterinary team to securely access a vein. In this situation, your vet will discuss the options with you. Sedative injections are often given into your pet's muscle to make them sleepy and relaxed so a vein can be more easily accessed.



Once the veterinary team has access to a vein and everyone is ready for the euthanasia, the drug will be administered and your pet will drift off to sleep before their heart stops. We encourage you to stroke your pet, touch them and reassure them. If you have opted not to be in the room during the process, our experienced team will soothe your pet and talk to them. Some pets pass away more quickly than others, but many owners are often surprised at how quickly and peacefully they slip away. The vet will then listen with a stethoscope to check that your pet's heart has stopped and confirm that they have died. Please be aware that some pets may give one or several little gasps as their body shuts down, and some may also twitch after passing away. While this doesn't always happen, it's important to know that your pet will be completely unaware and comfortable if it does. Our pet's eyes also remain open after they have died, which may come as a shock if you aren't expecting it.

Once your pet has passed away, we allow you as much time as you need to say goodbye and leave the room to give you some privacy. We completely understand if you would rather leave straight away. You can choose to leave your pet with us for cremation, or if you prefer you can take them with you for burial.



## What will you want to do with your pet's body?

This is a very personal decision and only you know what's right. There are several options available to you and although the veterinary team are always here to discuss them, we appreciate making these decisions can feel very overwhelming. For some owners the thought of a burial or keeping their pet's ashes is too upsetting and they prefer to simply cherish their memories of their pet. Others wish to mark their pet's life by burying them at home or taking their individual ashes back to scatter. There is no right or wrong decision. Take time to decide what you are comfortable with and what best supports your grieving process.

## What are the options?

### Burial:

Not everyone likes the idea of cremation and some people still want to feel physically close to their pets or have a special place that they can visit. In this case, burial gives you the opportunity to select a spot and mark it with a headstone, ornament or plant.

In the UK, burial can happen either at home or in a pet cemetery. It is against the law to bury your pet in any other area without permission. If you rent your home, you will need to obtain permission from your landlord. Similarly, if you wanted to bury your pet in a spot on their favourite walk you would need to get the landowner's permission.

You must also not bury your pet near any watercourse, as this may allow the drugs used during euthanasia to enter the wider environment and become a risk to other life forms.

*If you opt for burial, there are some simple guidelines which may help:*

- The grave needs to be 1.25 metres deep. This is to prevent your pet's body being dug up by other animals.
- Do not bury the body in non-degradable or plastic bags. Either use a casket or simply wrap the body in a towel or blanket.
- Please take great care to avoid electric cables and water and gas pipes when digging.

Pet cemeteries are another option for burial. They prepare the plot and maintain the grave on your behalf. There is usually a cost for this service.

### *Cremation?*

We use Pet Cremation Services, who are accredited through the International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories. You will have the option of an individual cremation or a communal cremation.

With an individual cremation your pet's body will be cremated on its own. You will receive the ashes back in a casket of your choice with a certificate confirming the individual cremation. Our team can discuss casket options with you and are always conscious that this can be a difficult discussion to have. Where possible, it is often beneficial to discuss cremation and casket options in advance, so that you can take time to consider your wishes rather than making an 'on the spot' decision at a time of great emotion.

With a communal cremation, your pet's body is cremated along with other pets and their ashes are scattered in the memorial garden at the crematorium.

Pet Cremation Services have a comprehensive website ([www.pcsonline.org.uk](http://www.pcsonline.org.uk)), which has lots of helpful information for you to look at. Our team are also on hand to answer any questions you may have.



## Other ways to cherish your pet's memory

While some owners are happy to cherish their memories of their beloved pet, others may find comfort in finding additional ways to remember them. Some potential ideas include:

- Keeping a lock of fur
- Having ink or clay paw prints made
- Creating a memory book
- Making a charitable donation in your pet's memory
- Planting a tree or another type of plant
- Adding a dedication to an online book of remembrance
- Having personalised jewellery made
- Lighting a candle each year

You can find more options on: [pcsonline.org.uk](https://www.pcsonline.org.uk)



## Bereavement - Understanding grief

Bereavement is the time we spend dealing with loss. Grief is the sorrow we feel during this time which can manifest itself in several ways.

There isn't a set of rules for dealing with grief or a set timescale. Every relationship between an owner and their pet is unique and whilst most owners can feel degrees of sadness, longing, anger, guilt, numbness, loneliness and denial, the mix and depth of these emotions can vary considerably. For some people grief can become more serious and turn into depression. During bereavement, it is important that owners find ways to mourn their loss and express their grief.

The bereavement period can be a confusing time, involving a lot of very powerful emotions. Not everyone experiences the same stages of bereavement at the same time, to the same degree or in the same order. However, most people generally go through the following four stages at some point:

- 🐾 Accepting that your loss really happened
- 🐾 Experiencing the pain that comes with grief
- 🐾 Trying to adjust to life without your pet
- 🐾 Moving on

No one should be judged for their reaction to the loss of a pet. People need to come to terms with the death in their own time and shouldn't be pressured by others to 'move on'. Some owners will benefit from talking to professional pet bereavement counsellors.

Some people are pragmatic in their outlook to both life and death and are able to move on quickly. This doesn't mean they did not love their pet dearly. For other people the loss of a pet can be like a huge cloud over them, rendering them unable to cope with day-to-day life. This can last for days, weeks, months and in extreme cases years.

If you are making the decision to have your pet put to sleep, or if you know that your pet's health is failing and you are expecting them to pass away, you can suffer from anticipatory grief. This form of grief may include all the feelings associated with grief after their passing, but can also may encompass fear of life without your pet. Anticipatory grief is a lot more common than most people think and is perfectly normal. It does not mean that you are failing your pet in any way or giving up on them.

If you know you don't have long left with your pet, make the most of the time left with your beloved companion and take the time to express your love before they have passed away. Some people gain great comfort from expressing their feelings on paper or keeping a grief journal.

## Helping children to cope with the loss of a pet

Children can have a special bond with their family pets and sometimes the passing of their 'best friend' can be a huge shock to them – especially if experiencing death for the first time.

Parents often find it difficult to break the news to children and to know what to say and how to say it. This will depend on the child's age, maturity level and life experience.

If your pet is old or has a progressive illness, it can help to talk to children in advance. If you have to have your pet euthanised, explain that:

- 🐾 Your pet wouldn't get better
- 🐾 This is the kindest way to take away the suffering
- 🐾 The vet has done all that they can
- 🐾 Your pet will die peacefully

Some children may ask how it will happen. Avoid using the term 'put to sleep', as many children will take this literally and therefore expect your pet to wake up later, or worse, some children may develop sleep anxieties.

Whilst it can be tempting, it is better not to lie to our children. For example, even if you say your pet has run away, they will still grieve for their missing friend.

It's also important not to be afraid of showing our own sadness in front of our children. They need to know that the emotions they are feeling are perfectly natural.



## Do other pets feel the loss of their housemate?

Recent studies have shown that dogs and cats do indeed mourn for a housemate who is no longer there. Typical behaviours include checking their companion's usual resting places and becoming clingier with their owner.

Other symptoms can include them becoming more vocal, going off their food or sleeping more.

Some animal behaviourists believe that the grief response in animals can be reduced if they view their companion's deceased body.

Managing the grief of other pets:

### Ignore unwanted behaviour and reward positive behaviour

- You need to be careful that you don't accidentally reinforce unwanted behaviours such as crying or vocalising. Although not giving these behaviours attention may seem mean, it is kinder in the long run. By all means comfort your pet when they are quiet or lying in their bed.

### Keep your routine as normal as possible

- There will be enough change to your pet's life at this time, so keep to the same waking up and feeding times. If you go on a dog walk stick to the same route.

### Expect a change in the social order

- If you have a multi-pet household, the remaining pets may compete for alpha status by eating each other's food, stealing each other's toys and treats or claiming a particular bed. You may also see general changes in their behaviour as a result.

### Keep an eye on the general health of your pets

- Like humans, pets can react physically to grief, so watch out for changes in their routines. Are they going off their food, eating more or less, still keen to play?



## *Common feelings of grief which owners may experience*

### *Sadness:*

Generally, the feelings of sadness associated with loss will ease over time. The time can vary, but for most people this will be measured in days. During this time, you may feel lethargic, apathetic and lonely, and these feelings may be very powerful.

For some people, these feelings do not lift and start to affect their ability to undertake regular daily tasks, causing them to become very withdrawn from daily life and which may even lead to depression. This is a recognised clinical condition and if you find yourself in this situation you should seek medical advice.

### *Anger:*

Life can seem very unfair when a loved one is taken away and one of the emotions that surfaces at this time is anger. This can be directed at yourself, family and friends, people who don't understand, your vet or even God.

### *Guilt:*

Many owners will feel guilty when their pet dies, especially if they have made the difficult decision to have their pet euthanised. Most commonly the questions they ask themselves are 'did I leave my pet hanging on too long?', or conversely 'did I make the decision too soon?' We always advise owners to speak to their vet beforehand and take their advice. Vets will know if your pet is suffering and how a condition will progress over time, and they will help advise you on when the best time is. Remember that any decision you have reached comes from your love for your pet. Try to move on from these negative emotions and allow yourself to heal. Remember the happy times you spent together.

### *Denial:*

Denial is usually experienced directly after the loss of a loved one. People in denial will generally make themselves too busy to feel the loss which can prolong the period of healing.

It really helps to open up about your loss. Some people won't understand how devastating the loss of a pet can be, but there will be many of your family and friends that will understand what you are going through and be there to support you.

## Bereavement support services

The Pet Bereavement Support Service is run by the Blue Cross charity and is available to talk to if you have suffered a loss or are facing saying goodbye. The service is available between 8.30am and 8.30pm. They can be reached by telephone on **0800 096 6606**.

The Ralph Site **theralphsite.com** is a website full of information regarding pet bereavement. The site contains a list of, and contact details for, a number of UK based pet bereavement counsellors.

You can find more details and advice to support you through the end of your companion's life at: **compassionunderstood.com**





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