

Euthanasia and Your Pet - What You Need to Know

I find myself, once again, seated at a counter in the United Club at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. I'm flying back to where I grew up to say goodbye to my Yiayia (that's Greek for grandmother) who passed last week. As I contemplate about what to write for this week's blog post, I can't help but think about euthanasia, specifically my responsibilities as a veterinarian to ensure my patient's transition is as peaceful as possible. Fittingly I've decided to share some information about euthanasia with the sincere hope of alleviating anxiety.

Euthanasia - Be Sure You Understand What is Going to Happen

In my opinion, euthanasia is, by far, my most important job as a veterinarian. That may sound a little weird. Some of you may even think euthanasia should be the last thought on my mind. Yet for families who have to say goodbye to a beloved fur baby, humane euthanasia is, in a way, a peaceful gift I can give them at an emotionally tumultuous time. Key to ensuring euthanasia is truly serene is helping families understand what is going to happen during euthanasia. Below I describe how I have helped families with euthanasia for more than a decade.

Euthanasia - Questions Pet Parents Will Need to Answer

After making the intensely emotional decision to help a fur baby pass with dignity via humane euthanasia, families have two important questions to answer:

- Do they want to be present for the euthanasia?
- How do they want the veterinary medical team to care for their pet's body?

The answer to the first question is a very individual one, one for which there is no right or wrong answer. Several factors influence a family's decision, particularly the nature of their bond with the pet and their previous experiences with euthanasia. Permit me to share a personal experience. I was not present for the

euthanasia of my very first pet, a cat called Hercules. I was only barely thirteen when I had to say goodbye to him. I can close my eyes and still see him staring back at me from his kennel as if to say, “Where are you going buddy Why are you leaving me?” To this day, I regret not staying with him until the veterinarian helped him pass. I believe I should’ve held him as he transitioned. I should’ve been stronger for him.



Me with my first cat, Hercules. We slept like this every night.

The question of body care is also a very delicate one. Families always have the

option of bringing their pet's body home for burial. The most common request for body care is private cremation, exactly the same process that happens for people. A pet's body is individually cremated, and the remains are returned to the family. Some families bury the ashes. Others keep them on display in their homes. Some companies provide services to incorporate some ashes into jewelry and pieces of art.

Euthanasia - The Actual Process

Families must give a veterinarian permission to perform humane euthanasia; pet parents give consent by signing a legal document. Once signed, I have a member of my nursing team place an intravenous catheter. This is how the euthanasia drugs are painlessly administered to a sick pet. In most circumstances, families will need to signal the attending veterinarian to perform the euthanasia when they are as ready as they can be. I understand no family will ever truly be ready to say goodbye to a fur baby.

To help a pet transition, I give two intravenous injections. The first is a sedative, and simply helps a pet fall asleep. The last is the terminal injection, an overdose of anesthesia. The effects of each drug happen within seconds, and the transition process is not associated with any pain, stress, or anxiety. While I'm injecting the medications, pet parents can hold their fur baby in their arms, on the floor, or on the table top. The location doesn't matter to me. The only thing that matters is that patient and family are as comfortable as possible.



A veterinarian sits on the floor with patient and family

A veterinarian will gently but directly pronounce to families a pet's passing. Pet

parents need to be aware of some natural events that happen to the body due to relaxation of various muscles, specifically:

- The deceased pet may leak some urine or feces
- The deceased pet may look like it is taking a breath and/or make an unusual noise
- The eyelids can't be naturally closed if the pet doesn't close them as it transitions
- Fluid that was inappropriately trapped in the lungs may appear at the mouth and/or nose

After a pet has passed, I allow families to spend as much time as needed with their deceased pet. Some need several minutes while others require only a few minutes. Please allow me to share another personal story. A couple of years ago I performed euthanasia for one of my favorite patients, a sweet Shih Tzu who beat immune-mediated hemolytic anemia but who was losing her battle with heart disease. The pet's passing was entirely peaceful. When the parent signaled to me that she was ready to leave, I said, "I can take her from you." The owner looked me square in the eyes and said, "I don't want you to take her from me. I want to give her to you." I honestly had never thought about the difference, but it changed how I approach this scenario. I now ask, "Do you want me to take her/him from you, or do you want to give her/him to me?" I'm so grateful to the pet parent who opened my eyes to its impact.

Euthanasia - Saying Goodbye at Home

I am asked by families more and more about at-home euthanasia. They believe their fur baby will be more relaxed in a familiar environment. Many locales have veterinarians who offer hospice care and home euthanasia services. I strongly encourage pet parents to speak with their family veterinarian about end of life decisions proactively so the transition process is as smooth as possible when the time comes to say goodbye.

The take-away about euthanasia in dogs and cats...

Performing euthanasia is an inevitable part of our job as veterinarians. Veterinarians have an obligation to ensure the passing of our patients is as peaceful as possible. The grieving process is uniquely personal, and veterinarians

also have a responsibility to provide a supportive environment that promotes healing and closure.

Wishing you wet-nosed kisses,

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