

# When the time comes

## Preparing to say goodbye

Sadly, our pets have much shorter lives than us and when illness, injury, or old age affects their quality of life we may need to start thinking about letting them go, peacefully. Thinking about euthanasia - literally, a "gentle and easy death" - is something that no pet owner likes to dwell on, but sadly it is a decision that many eventually have to face. Taking responsibility for a pain-free, peaceful death is the kindest act an owner can do for a much-loved pet.

## When is the right time?

Sometimes it's difficult to know how our pet is really feeling. They can't tell us if they are in pain so it's our responsibility to look for the signs of any changes that suggest that their quality of life is deteriorating. You may notice your pet's normal behaviour and routine has changed. They may become particularly withdrawn or quiet, disinterested in any physical contact or going out. They may have stopped eating or drinking, and their toileting habits may have changed. An injury or illness may be affecting their wellbeing, physically or mentally.

## Preparing to say goodbye

To prevent further pain and unnecessary suffering it is important to act in their best interest concerning the end of their life. It helps to plan and be prepared. Talk through options with your vet who will help to guide you on the right time for making the best decisions about euthanasia for you and your pet.

## Should I be there?

This is a very personal decision. Talk it through with friends, family or your vet. Some people prefer to be with their pet during euthanasia and others feel it's just too difficult and feel unable to stay.

Do whatever is best for you and your pet and don't feel pressurised into doing something you don't want to do. Say your goodbyes at the right time for you. It's your decision, so don't be afraid to let your vet or vet nurse know how you feel.

## What can I expect?

You may want to think about where you would prefer the euthanasia to take place. It may be at the vet surgery at an arranged time, or it may be possible for the vet to come to your home. The euthanasia of larger animals, such as horses, is usually done where they live, unless it's an emergency. Consideration will need to be made on the most suitable location. Talk to your vet about all of your options.

You will be asked to sign a form giving your consent and the euthanasia will be carried out by a vet, who is often assisted by a vet nurse.

You may want to ask for your pet to be given a sedative first to help relax them. A small area of fur is shaved, usually from a front leg, and an injection is gently administered into the vein. This is a high dose of anaesthetic. As the injection is given your pet will lose consciousness within seconds. Their breathing and heart will stop.

Sometimes, especially if your pet is old or frail, or if they have had a sedative, the vet may have difficulty in finding a vein and may have to inject into another location.

If your pet is a small animal, such as a hamster or rabbit, your vet may give them anaesthetic gas first so that they are asleep for the injection. These pets have smaller blood vessels and the injection is likely to be given into another area of the body. Horses are euthanased by either injection or by another humane method.

It is important to remember that your pet will lose consciousness almost immediately and will not be aware of anything.

## What to expect afterwards

Your pet's eyes will probably remain open, their muscles may twitch and there might be an involuntary gasp or two. These are normal reactions following euthanasia. Your vet will make sure that the euthanasia has been completed and that your pet's heart has stopped beating.

## What happens next?

You may want to consider having a small keepsake of your pet such as their collar or name tag, a paw print, or a small piece of their fur or a section of hair from your horse. Afterwards, you may want to take your pet to bury in the garden or use a pet cemetery.

Another choice is cremation. Your vet may be able to organise this for you or offer you contact details.

Pets may be cremated individually or communally with others. If you arrange to have your pet cremated individually you will have the ashes returned to you in a casket to keep or scatter in a favourite spot. A communal cremation means that you will not be able to have your pet's ashes returned. Either way, you can expect your pet will be treated with dignity and respect.

Ask your vet as many questions as possible about the available options, the likely costs involved, and the services and standard of care you can expect from the pet crematorium.

You could also remember your pet in a special way. You could plant some flowers or a shrub or make a special photo album.

We have a pet memorial area on our website where you can choose to remember your pets by including photographs, keepsakes, pictures, poems or just a few words. There are also lots of books about pet grief that can help. For a recommended reading list, or to add a memorial visit: [bluecross.org.uk/create-tribute-your-pet](https://bluecross.org.uk/create-tribute-your-pet)

**PLS coping with loss  
when the time comes**



## **Support for you**

The time leading up to and following euthanasia and the death of your pet can be filled with mixed and raw emotions. Your pet has been a special companion and member of the family.

Some people experience intense feelings of grief, similar to a human loss. Often people describe feeling guilt or numbness over their loss and this is normal and understandable.

For others, there is a sense of calm and relief. Sharing your feelings and experience with others before and after euthanasia can be helpful. You may find friends and family can offer the support you need.

However, if you are struggling or would find it helpful to speak to someone who is unconnected to you then the team at our Pet Loss Support Service are here to help.

### **Free confidential helpline and email support service**

Blue Cross's Pet Loss Support Service is here to support everyone young and old through their loss and help you come to terms with it. We provide a phone support service which is open every day of the year, including bank holidays.

#### **To make contact call: FREEPHONE 0800 096 6606**

The confidential support line is open everyday 8.30am-8.30pm. For those who prefer to write we also have an email service.

**[plsmail@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:plsmail@bluecross.org.uk)**

Expect a response from this within a 48 hour period.

**Webchat (8.30am-8.30pm)**

**[Bluecross.org.uk/about-pls](https://bluecross.org.uk/about-pls)**

For further copies of this leaflet, please contact:

#### **Pet Loss Support Service**

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Email: [plsteam@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:plsteam@bluecross.org.uk)

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