

CAT 5

# Time to say **goodbye**



The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



## **Time to say goodbye**

**Cats do not live as long as humans. 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 cat owners eventually have to face.**

If you are considering euthanasia of a healthy pet then do not forget that rehoming may be a better option. Ask your vet's advice – many can help with solving behavioural problems and they have information on rehoming.

## Is it pain or old age?

Always discuss this with your vet. Do not be afraid to visit the vet sooner rather than later. Many of the signs of "old age", such as arthritis, can be relieved. Your cat's problems may be treatable – and early treatment reduces suffering.

Cats do not necessarily show pain by crying or yowling. Assessment of long-term pain can be difficult even for vets, as animals (and people) tend to adapt their behaviour to cope. Sometimes the only way is to try using painkillers (only use those prescribed by a vet) to see if your pet brightens up.

Your cat could be in pain if there has been a change in behaviour, a loss of appetite and a reluctance to play or move around, or if your pet is not washing or grooming. It may also be a sign of pain if your cat is restless and cannot seem to get comfortable, is sitting or lying in an abnormal position, seems tense or withdrawn, or has just lost enthusiasm for life. Purring is not a sign of comfort – even cats in extremes of pain will still purr. Always discuss your cat's symptoms with your vet, as all of these signs can also be caused by problems other than pain.

## Arriving at a decision

Talk it over with your vet and your family and friends. Questions to think about include:

- Can your pet still eat, drink, sleep and move around reasonably comfortably?
- Does he or she respond to your presence and greet you?
- Does feeding time attract interest?

Persistent and incurable inability to eat, vomiting, signs of pain, distress or discomfort, or difficulty in breathing are all indications that euthanasia should be considered. You and your family know your pet better than anyone else, so try to make a reasoned judgement on quality of life. Your vet will help you with this, and will often make a recommendation. If you are hoping for an improvement in your pet's condition, setting a time limit may be a sensible option. Sadly, few cats die peacefully in their sleep at home. Most reach a point when their quality of life is unsatisfactory and a decision for euthanasia has to be made.

Living with a chronically ill cat can be emotionally (and financially) draining. Often there is a substantial time commitment involved in care. Not every owner is able to cope and, if there is no chance of a recovery and you are unable to give your cat the degree of care needed for a comfortable life, it may be better to opt for euthanasia. With some invalid cats there is the possibility of a

sudden and unpredictable deterioration. If you are unable to make arrangements for your cat to receive emergency care (all vets in the UK have to make provision for this) euthanasia may be a better option.

## What actually happens?

Consider taking some time off work to get over the event. Explain the situation to the receptionist when you make the appointment as you can often choose a quiet time for your visit to the surgery. It may be a good idea for a friend or family member to come with you for support. Some vets will agree to make house visits if you prefer. If your pet is already hospitalised, then you can ask to visit and say goodbye if you wish. However, if your pet is under an anaesthetic, it may be kinder to agree to euthanasia without waking him, and perhaps to see him afterwards.

The following is a detailed description of the process. Some of the events described may be distressing, but remember that your pet rapidly loses consciousness and cannot feel pain from that point onwards.

You will normally need to sign a consent form. Euthanasia is usually carried out by injecting an overdose of anaesthetic into the vein of the front leg, although the injection can be given to other areas of the body as well. Your pet is held by a nurse and a small patch of fur is shaved off. All your cat feels is a tiny prick of the needle – then the injection is painless. Occasionally, a cat may give a small cry as the injection is given – as with all anaesthetics, there is a brief feeling of dizziness as the drug takes effect. Unconsciousness follows within seconds, often before the injection is finished.





Death occurs within a couple of minutes when the heart stops beating. It may take a little longer if the animal is very ill or has poor circulation. In these cases, it can sometimes be difficult for the vet to find a vein.

If a cat is agitated or restless, then the vet may give a sedative first, but finding a vein can then be more difficult and the injection may work more slowly.

In the few minutes after death you may see reflex muscle movement, or involuntary gasps. These are not signs of life; in fact, they are reflexes denoting that death has occurred. The eyes usually stay open and the bladder sometimes empties.

The vast majority of euthanasias proceed smoothly and quickly with little

distress to the animal. Even if there are difficulties, it is still a quick procedure that can save your cat many days or weeks of suffering and a painful end.

### **Should you stay with your cat?**

This is entirely your choice. It may be a comfort for you to see that euthanasia is usually a quick and gentle process. Try not to feel guilty if you feel unable to watch – if you are upset then this may upset your cat. Vets and nurses choose their profession because they want to help animals. You can rely on them to treat your pet sympathetically even in your absence. If you wish, ask to see your cat afterwards. At the end you will probably be offered the opportunity to be alone with your pet for a few minutes.

## What happens afterwards?

Most people opt for cremation arranged by the vet. Usually, this is communal cremation with other pets but you can arrange for individual ashes to be returned, although this may be expensive. There are pet cemeteries for which vets usually have details, or you can take the body home for burial. If you are undecided, then vets can usually store the body while you consider. Don't be embarrassed to ask if you wish to keep a lock of hair, or perform a ceremony such as saying a prayer – vets are quite used to such requests and will be sympathetic.

It is entirely natural to feel upset when your cat dies. After all, your pet is a beloved family member. Do not be embarrassed about showing your emotions – veterinary staff expect you to be upset. It takes time to get over the loss of a loved one, and, although reactions differ, often a mixture of feelings – sadness, loneliness and anger – can follow. Try not to feel guilty or blame yourself – the decision for euthanasia is taken with your pet's interests at heart to avoid suffering. Some people find themselves questioning whether they did the right thing. It is normal to feel some doubt, though this will ease in time.

Be prepared for the house to feel empty on your return. Try to treasure your memories and talk to family

and friends. If you have questions about your cat's condition, then talk to your vet. Sometimes family, friends and work colleagues who themselves have not experienced a special relationship with an animal, may be unsympathetic or make unhelpful remarks. It can also be helpful to talk to someone who understands your feelings such as our Pet Bereavement Support Service (see end of leaflet for contact details).

For children it can be especially upsetting, as it may be their first experience of death. Children need support even if they are not outwardly upset. Talk to them honestly about what is happening and, as far as possible, involve them in the decision making. Rituals such as funerals, making a memorial or assembling a scrapbook with memories of the cat may help. Be prepared for questions about death and its finality. For adolescents the loss of a pet can be particularly difficult, as your cat may be the family member to whom they feel closest. For young people who have other difficulties in their lives, the loss of a pet can be devastating, and it may be sensible to seek professional advice.

Other pets may notice the loss and respond to it. They may be unsettled and lose their appetite for one or two days. It may help if they see the body of the deceased pet. Giving them extra attention may provide some comfort.

## Another cat?

Sooner or later you may start to think about getting another cat. No two cats are the same and, although another may have characteristics in common with your previous cat, your new cat will have a different personality. Your relationship is not a “replacement” but it can still be rewarding. Everyone is different, and when you feel that you want another pet, you will probably find that your new cat is a worthy successor. The knowledge you have gained from caring for your cat could be put to good use caring for one of the many cats currently in shelters for want of an experienced owner.

If you have other cats, remember that bonding can be very specific to an individual. A different cat may not be easily accepted as a substitute companion, even though you wish to have another cat around. You cannot force cats to like each other – some live with a newcomer easily, but others never get on or only manage to live together in an uneasy truce. However, if there is no competition for food or safe sleeping places, most cats accept each other and some even form close bonds. Taking things slowly with careful introductions is vital to prevent

excessive reactions – see the pet care leaflet, Introducing your cat to other pets (C23).

## Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS)

Sometimes it helps to share your feelings with someone who knows from personal experience how distressing the loss of a pet can be, and who will listen with compassion and without judgement.

The Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS) is a telephone helpline and email service that offers such support to bereaved pet owners, through a national network of trained volunteer befrienders.

Telephone: 0800 096 6606  
(seven days a week 8.30am – 8.30pm)  
Email: [pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk)



# Happy, healthy pets

**Blue Cross** advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)

**Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:**

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

**Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.**



## Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

## How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

**Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)**



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