



Avenue Veterinary Centre Ltd

Pendennis Avenue, Staple Hill, Bristol BS16 5DW

Tel: 0117 956 9038 Fax: 0117 970 2077

www.avenue-vets.com

Registered Company No. 06541790

The last chapter

It is a sad fact of life that our pets have a lifespan considerably shorter than our own. As our companions start to age, many owners worry about the end of their pet's life and how they will make the right decision when the time comes. It's important to remember firstly that however difficult we find these decisions, our pets live entirely in the moment, with no worries about the future. Many owners have said that they wish their pet would just slip away in their basket and absolve them of the responsibility of making a decision. The reality is in most cases a point is reached where the decision to choose euthanasia (literally 'a gentle death') is the kindest thing for a much loved pet.

The first thing to do when you realise your pet is getting older is come and talk to us. There is so much we can do to help our golden oldies, and often the changes owners accept as an inevitable part of getting older are actually signs of illness or chronic pain which could be treated. Your vet can help you make a reasoned judgement about your pet's quality of life. For an animal that is gradually going downhill, having some criteria to assess quality of life (we consider appetite and thirst, ability to rest comfortably, mobility, social relationships, ability to play) can help you make a decision. There may also be emotional, practical and financial issues to discuss about caring for a pet that is becoming more dependent.

In many cases a decision that euthanasia is the correct option is reached gradually and there is time to plan, so that you have some input into how that happens. It can be helpful afterwards to know that your wishes were carried out and not to feel as though something could have been done differently. In cases where an animal is suffering and there needs to be an immediate decision to euthanase, it is also helpful to be aware of what will happen. For a planned euthanasia we can offer a home visit or for you to attend the surgery at a quieter time so that stress to the animal and yourself is minimised. We require owners to sign a consent form giving us permission to euthanase the pet, but this could be completed ahead of time. It is entirely up to you whether you choose to be present during the procedure. If you do not want to stay you can be reassured that your pet will be well looked after by a vet and nurse who went into their profession because they love animals and will have been through the loss of their own pets.

Euthanasia is performed by giving an injection into a vein in the front leg which is a big overdose of an anaesthetic drug. Your pet will be encouraged to settle either lying or sitting down. If a pet is fractious or distressed about being held, a sedative injection can be given so the pet is sleepy. The vet will clip a small patch of fur from the front leg and the nurse will hold the top of the leg to assist the vet to access a vein. The injection can be given directly through a needle or through a catheter (small flexible plastic tube inserted into the vein). If you choose to be present for the injection you will be able to hold your pet's head and reassure them whilst the injection is given. The big dose of anaesthetic causes the pet to become unconscious within seconds and then will stop their heart. The eyes remain open, you will see or feel your pet's body relax and the vet will use a stethoscope to check that the heart has stopped beating. Sometimes after a pet has died, they will gasp, their muscles may twitch or the bladder or bowel may release. It's important to remember that whilst this may be upsetting for you, the pet is no longer aware of any of this. If you would like some time alone with your pet the staff can give you some privacy to say goodbye.



Mark C. Picton
BVSc MRCVS

Surgery hours by appointment

Mon-Sat 9.00 - 11.00am Mon-Fri 2.00 - 3.30pm Mon-Fri 4.30 - 6.30pm



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Some pets will need more of the drug than anticipated; this can appear that they are fit and well and “fighting” the euthanasia but actually the opposite is generally true. If your pet needs extra drug this is often because their circulation isn't very good and so the drug can't get around their body very well. Occasionally in these cases, or when we can't access the veins at all, we need to give the euthanising injection directly into the heart, liver or kidney, but we always make sure your pet is sedated first in this case so this isn't painful for them.

It's also helpful to have thought in advance about your wishes after your pet has died. Owners have the option to take their pet home for burial, but this may not be practical. The vet can arrange cremation and will have an arrangement with the crematorium so your pet can be collected from the surgery. If the pet is put to sleep at your home it is often possible for the local crematorium to collect directly if you would prefer. Pets are cremated either together (communal cremation) or can be cremated individually and their ashes returned to you. Ashes can be returned in a biodegradable scatter tube or in a variety of wooden caskets or urns. Examples can be seen at the practice or your individual requirements discussed with the crematorium. If you wish, the vet can also make paw prints or take hair clippings for you.

If there are children in the family you may have concerns about how to handle the death of a pet to cause them minimum distress. Experts recommend being honest in a way appropriate to their age, and to avoid the phrase 'put to sleep' with young children as it can lead to fears about going to sleep/bedtime. They may find it helpful to have some sort of funeral ceremony or make a memory box with photos and drawings of their pet.

It is perfectly normal to grieve when a beloved pet dies, and there is no need to be embarrassed about showing your feelings with us. Grief at the loss of a pet is not always understood by family and friends. You are welcome to come and have a private chat, a cry and a cup of tea with one of the nurses if you would like to, or write something to go with a photo of your pet in our memory book. If you are finding it particularly difficult, there are organisations that can offer phone support, including the Pet Bereavement Support Service run by the Blue Cross 0800 0966606.



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