



Caring for a dog with terminal cancer

Although treatment options are available for many types of cancer, sometimes intensive anticancer treatment is not a good choice with an incurable disease. Decisions need to be made about how to best care for your dog to ensure they have a good quality of life for as long as possible. Planning end of life care is also important. Knowing when the time to say good-bye is approaching brings with it many emotions and feelings that can make end of life decisions difficult.

Once an incurable diagnosis has been made and the prognosis for your dog is poor, it may be a matter of days or weeks of survival that you are faced with. You will need to make some tough decisions at this time and you will likely wish to discuss with your vet practice how best to care for your dog. In many cases, when your dog is still comfortable and relatively healthy, palliative or hospice style home care is an option to allow you to plan the next steps. In some cases, the kindest decision may be to opt for euthanasia, particularly if your dog is in pain and suffering.

Palliative care involves using medication to relieve pain and discomfort, including the non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) such as meloxicam, opioid pain relievers, steroids such as prednisolone and sometimes local anaesthetics. Palliative care can make your dog more comfortable, giving you an opportunity to spend some quality time with your dog and make the most of the time they have left. Owners often comment on how much of a difference a little pain relieving medicine makes in making their dog more comfortable and even improving appetite. In most instances you should be able to arrange for palliative care in your home and, if necessary for a veterinary surgeon to perform euthanasia in your home. If your practice does not offer this, there is specialist help available; for example, from Vets2Home website and Suzen Gregersen's team (<https://www.peacefulpetgoodbyes.uk/faq/>).

A dog relies on its sense of smell so warming food and offering special treats can help to keep a dog eating well on its own. It is also very important to ensure that there are plenty of opportunities to drink liquids so your dog does not become dehydrated. Multiple water bowls with fresh and/or flowing water, chicken stock or other tasty broths can encourage dogs to take in enough liquids

As a pet owner, you know your dog better than anyone and, in most cases, will know when it is time to let them go. However, if you are not certain you will know then talk to your vet about things to look out for. Generally, most of us feel that it is better to let a pet pass away before their quality of life is seriously affected. As much as we would like our pets (and family) to die peacefully, this is not a common occurrence. Many owners report that their only regret was in waiting too long before ending their dog's suffering.

When is it time to say good-bye?

Sadly, there will come a time when your dog is suffering and has lost their quality of life. Often there is a change in behaviour such as hiding or flinching when touched, becoming withdrawn, loss of appetite, reluctance to move, restlessness or difficulty in getting comfortable. If your dog is no longer his/her “old self”, then usually you will know that it is time. It is useful to note the number of good days and bad days in a week and perhaps observe your dog over several weeks to see how they are responding to any treatment you are giving them. A “good” day might be one where your dog is willing to do those activities it normally enjoys such as going for a walk or playing with a toy and eats and drinks without any coaxing. A “bad” day might be one where you cannot tempt your dog to eat or drink much and/or he/she may have a toileting accident or strain to do any eliminations. When the bad days outweigh the good, you will know that it is time to make decisions about end of life options.

It is important that you feel comfortable having a discussion with your vet practice about end of life options, including the euthanasia procedure, care of the remains and how you wish to be involved. You may wish to visit The Pet Loss Blog site where Caroline Hewson has some very good information that may help you and your vet practice (<https://petplancharitabletrust.org.uk/the-pet-loss-blog/>). There is a quality of life scale available online (<https://vetsocialwork.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Quality-of-Life.pdf> or <https://journeypet.com/pet-quality-of-life-scale-calculator/>) that can help you to ask yourself if you are able to provide enough help to maintain your ailing dog without further compromising quality of life. Quality of life means the physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of our pets and it can be thought of as having both the ‘freedom to’ and the ‘freedom from’ many activities/feelings including:

freedom to

- make choices
- participate in activities that bring joy
- connect with others

freedom from

- pain
- severe or prolonged fear
- significant distress or anxiety

These are very basic things that should be at the heart of each and every quality of life assessment and decision that is made about a pet. While we would all like our dogs to die in their sleep, this is extremely uncommon and most dogs who die naturally suffer pain and discomfort at the end. Euthanasia is the final gift we can give our much loved pets when the time is right. The challenge is that it can be hard to know how soon that time will come. Its rather like being on a slope halfway up a mountain– you know that at the end you will be at the bottom of the mountain, but you don’t know how steep that slope will be. The speed of deterioration can also change. Knowing that your dog has a cancer which will ultimately be the reason that you need to let him/her go is very difficult. It is emotionally exhausting for everyone involved in the care of your dog. However, it also gives you the chance to plan their end of life so that their final day is as good as it can be.

End of life decision making

Although many owners seek veterinary assistance with euthanasia, some would prefer their animals to die naturally. As much as we would like our pets (and family) to die peacefully, this is not a common occurrence. Many owners report that their only regret was in waiting too long before ending their pet's suffering. In most cases you can arrange for a veterinary surgeon to perform euthanasia in your home.

There is a great deal of information available about end of life decisions and pet loss with support from many websites and associations including Blue Cross for Pets, PDSA, RSPCA, The Ralph Site, HelpGuide.org.

When making end of life decisions, there is a lot to think about including:

- Whether you would like to have euthanasia performed at home or at the vets. Many vet practices have a special room where they will meet with you to discuss and perform the procedure.
- Does your pet have a favourite place, food or activity that you would like him/her to be able to experience on its final day?
- Who needs to say goodbye and who wants to be present during the euthanasia procedure?
- What would like to happen after your pet has passed away?
- Do you want any mementos such as hair or paw prints?
- Do you want to have your pet cremated or would you prefer to have them buried?
- Do you want to have an individual cremation and get your pet's ashes back to keep or to scatter at a place that was special for you both?

It can be helpful to start to have conversations about these issues well in advance of your pet's final day. Keeping a note of the things you will need or want for that day makes it easier to remember them when the day comes as you are undoubtedly going to be upset and find remembering the plans you made difficult.

Animal Cancer Trust is a Registered Charity number 1094779 and it is also a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales, company number 04434009. The registered address of the company is 49 Station Road, Polegate, Eastbourne, East Sussex BN26 6EA. Telephone 07376 213 733