Quality of life and end of life decisions

As vets we are often asked the questions about quality of life and end of life issues such as:

"How will I know if my pet is suffering?"

"I'm not sure whether to put my pet through any more treatment."

"How do I know my pet still has sufficient quality of life?"

"How will I know when it is time?"

"What would you do if this were your pet?"

A common response often given to caregivers is that "You will know when the time is right"; however, this can place pressure on caregivers as it is not always clear when the time is right. From the moment a pet is diagnosed with a lifelong or life-limiting condition or is approaching old age, a caregiver may start looking at everything their pet does and analysing what it means in terms of quality of life. This often leads to a bad day making a caregiver think that it is time for euthanasia but then the next day is a better day and this leads to putting off the decision. Rather than looking at each day in isolation, caregivers can look at the number of good and bad days over a week or several weeks and when the balance is moving towards more bad days than good, it will become clearer that it is time to make a decision. However, before you reach this point, with an aging pet or a pet suffering from a chronic disease, you can use a quality of life (QoL) assessment tool on a regular basis to monitor your pet's QoL while it is still good. This will give you a baseline for comparison when QoL starts to deteriorate and can be helpful when it comes to making a decision. There are several QoL assessment tools for pets and also specific to dogs or cats available on the internet or your vet may have one they prefer to use and can give you guidance on how to use it.

Although each pet and caregiver's definition of a good QoL will be unique, it is generally accepted that QoL may be thought of as to what degree a pet is healthy, comfortable and able to participate in or enjoy life events. Their relationship with their caregiver(s) is also a big part of a pet's QoL. Research has shown that owners of cats with heart disease would trade longevity for QoL and treatment associated improvement in QoL is very important for cats with chronic kidney disease (Doit et al., 2021). Instruments designed to measure HRQL can be generic - designed for use in a variety of contexts in which health is good or is poor for a variety of reasons, or they can be disease-specific - designed for particular conditions and their treatment. Some pet QoL assessments have more questions relating to physical needs and clinical signs with only one or two questions relating to your pet's social and emotional needs; this can mean that a total QoL score in a pet with high pain levels may make the other scores less evident. It is important to look at the relevance of the questions and scores for you and your pet's situation. Some QoL instruments either generate a single index score that indicates that a patient is better or worse or a profile of scores that offers more information and may be more sensitive to group differences and to changes in health status over time. While it is impossible to devise an assessment method that will work perfectly for every pet and caregiver, below are links to a few QoL instruments available on the internet.

There is an online calculator for pets in general available at https://journeyspet.com/pet-quality-of-life-scale-calculator/. Another scale was developed by Dr. Alice Villaloboos, the veterinarian who started PawSpice; it is called the HHHHHMM Scale for the 7 aspects of Hurt, Hunger, Hydration, Hygiene, Happiness, Mobility and More Good Days than Bad. Each aspect is scored from 0 to 10, where 10 is ideal, giving a maximum total score of 70. A score of 5 or greater for each aspect with a total score of 35 is considered acceptable; when the total score drops below 35 or an individual score drops below 5, intervention is considered necessary.

The HHHHHMM Scale – each of the 7 items below should be scored from 0 to 10 with 10 being the maximum possible score:

Aspect	Description	Score
Hurt	Adequate pain control & breathing ability is of top concern. Trouble breathing outweighs all concerns. Is the pet's pain well managed? Can the pet breathe properly? Is oxygen supplementation necessary?	
Hunger	Is the pet eating enough? Does hand feeding help? Does the pet need a feeding tube?	
Hydration	Is the pet dehydrated? For patients not drinking enough water, use subcutaneous fluids daily or twice daily to supplement fluid intake.	
Hygiene	The pet should be brushed and cleaned, particularly after eliminations. Avoid pressure sores with soft bedding and keep all wounds clean.	
Happiness	Does the pet express joy and interest? Is the pet responsive to family, toys, etc.? Is the pet depressed, lonely, anxious, bored or afraid? Can the pet's bed be moved to be close to family activities?	
Mobility	Can the pet get up without assistance? Does the pet need human or mechanical help (e.g., a cart)? Does the pet feel like going for a walk? Is the pet having seizures or stumbling? (Some caregivers feel euthanasia is preferable to amputation, but an animal with limited mobility yet still alert, happy and responsive can have a good quality of life as long as caregivers are committed to helping their pet.)	
More good days than bad	When bad days outnumber good days, quality of life might be too compromised. When a healthy human-animal bond is no longer possible, the caregiver must be made aware that the end is near. The decision for euthanasia needs to be made if the pet is suffering. If death comes peacefully and painlessly at home, that is okay.	
	Total Score	

A score of 5 or greater for each aspect with a total score of 35 is considered acceptable.

References

Adapted from the original concept, Oncology Outlook, by Dr. Alice Villalobos, Quality of Life Scale Helps Make Final Call, VPN, 09/2004; scale format created for author's book, Canine and Feline Geriatric Oncology: Honoring the Human-Animal Bond, Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Revised for the International Veterinary Association of Pain Management (IVAPM) 2011 Palliative Care and Hospice Guidelines.

Belshaw Z, Asher L, Harvey ND, Dean RS. Quality of life assessment in domestic dogs: An evidence-based rapid review. Vet J. 2015 Nov;206(2):203-12. doi: 10.1016/j.tvjl.2015.07.016. Epub 2015 Jul 21. PMID: 26358965; PMCID: PMC4641869.

Doit H et al. 2021. A systematic review of the quality of life assessment tools for cats in the published literature. Vet J. 272:105658. doi: 10.1016/j.tvjl.2021.105658.