

# Time to say goodbye



THE BLUE CROSS

*Britain's pet charity*



## Time to say goodbye

Small pets 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 pet owners eventually have to face.



Euthanasia is most commonly used to end the suffering of sick or injured animals.

Reasons may include:

- diagnosis of an inoperable or untreatable condition
- treatment may not be working and recovery is unlikely
- treatment may be possible, but is questionable since it may simply be prolonging suffering without benefit

It is always advisable to discuss the option of euthanasia with your vet. Remember to include family members in the decision, particularly those who are fond of the pet or involved in its care.

## Is it pain or is it old age?

The lifespan of some pets such as hamsters or gerbils may be only two or three years. Just like other animals, small pets tend to “slow up” as they age. Sometimes they will develop conditions such as arthritis, which may be treatable. However, pet owners should consider their pet’s short lifespan – prolonged illness or extensive surgery in an aged pet may cause suffering with little long-term benefit.

Happy, healthy pets are bright, active and investigative. When sick or in pain, they are hunched, inactive and not interested in food. Assessment of pain can be difficult even for vets, and sometimes the only way is to try painkillers (only use those prescribed by a vet) to see if behaviour returns to normal.

It is sensible to visit the vet as soon as you notice your pet is unwell. Modern veterinary medicine means that therapy is now available for conditions that were untreatable in the past. However, diagnostic techniques and therapies are often less sophisticated for small pets than for dogs and cats. But veterinary treatment can still be costly even for small pets.

## I don’t understand it – he was fine yesterday

Illness in tiny animals often comes on rapidly, and owners are understandably stunned that a pet, bright and happy yesterday, is severely ill today. In the wild, many small animals are at risk from predators. This means they tend to hide early symptoms of illnesses and so are often extremely ill by the time symptoms are seen. And they have a fast metabolism (their bodies “work” at a high speed) so many illnesses worsen quickly. Sometimes they can be so ill that it is necessary for a decision for euthanasia to be made before a diagnosis can be reached.

## Arriving at a decision

Talk it over with your veterinary surgeon and your family and friends. One difficulty for owners is that small pets are often dismissed as “children’s pets” by those who do not appreciate them. Fortunately, attitudes are changing. Veterinary staff certainly understand how owners feel about much-loved pets – and appreciate their importance as patients.



## Questions to think about include:

- can your pet still eat, drink, sleep and move around reasonably comfortably?
- does your pet respond to you?
- does feeding time attract interest?

Persistent and incurable inability to eat, signs of pain, distress or discomfort, difficulty in breathing, and painful sores that will not heal are all indications that euthanasia should be considered. You know your pet best, so try to make a reasoned judgement on his or her quality of life. Your vet will help 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, not all small pets die peacefully in their sleep at home. Many reach a point when their quality of life is unsatisfactory and a decision for euthanasia has to be made.

Living with a chronically ill animal can be emotionally draining. The time needed for care may be considerable and not everyone can cope. If there is no chance of a recovery, it may be better to opt for euthanasia. Sometimes there is a risk of sudden and unpredictable deterioration. If you are unable to make arrangements for your pet to receive emergency care (all vets in the UK have to make provision for this), euthanasia may be kinder.

## What actually happens?

Consider taking time off work to get over the event. Explain the situation to the receptionist at your vet's when you make the appointment, as you will probably be offered a quiet time for your visit. You may want a friend or family member with you for support. Some vets make house visits if you prefer this option. If your pet is already hospitalised, then 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, and some of the events described may be distressing. Please remember that your pet rapidly loses consciousness and cannot feel pain from that point onwards.

You will normally need to sign a consent form, which gives the vet permission to euthanase your pet.

Euthanasia is usually carried out by injecting an overdose of anaesthetic. Your pet falls deeply asleep and feels no further pain. Death occurs within a couple of minutes when the heart stops beating. In dogs and cats the injection is usually given intravenously and the animal is asleep within seconds.

Small pets unfortunately have very small blood vessels, and so finding a vein – particularly when they are unwell and circulation is poor – can be very difficult. For this reason, it is often kinder to put the injection into other areas of the body, as it keeps the number of pinpricks to a minimum, although this does mean that it takes a few minutes to work.

An anaesthetic gas may be given first so that your pet doesn't feel the pinprick. This is a kind thing to do. The gas is mixed with oxygen, so it is not suffocation; the animal simply becomes drowsy and is asleep for the injection.

The vast majority of euthanasias proceed smoothly with little distress to the animal. Even if there are difficulties, it is still a quick procedure, which can save many days or weeks of suffering and a painful end.

## Should you stay with your pet?

This is entirely your choice. It may be a comfort to you to see that euthanasia is usually a quick and gentle process. 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.



However, if you are not used to it, it can be upsetting to see what can look like a relatively large injection being given to a small pet. Try not to feel guilty if you feel unable to watch – if you are upset, then this may upset your pet. 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 pet afterwards. At the end you will probably be offered the opportunity to be alone with your pet for a few minutes.

### **What happens afterwards?**

You may wish to 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 whilst

you consider. Do not be embarrassed to ask if you wish to keep some fur, 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 pet 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, very 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 pet'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, so far as possible, involve them in decision-making.

Rituals such as funerals, making a memorial or assembling a scrapbook with memories of the pet may help. Be prepared for questions about death and its finality. For adolescents the loss of a pet can be particularly difficult, as your animal 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 pet?

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

## Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS) contact details

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



[www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://www.allaboutpets.org.uk)

## The online community for you and your pets

*All About Pets* leaflets provide expert advice and support for pet owners. The lives of Britain's pets can be improved by increasing the knowledge of owners and promoting responsible animal care.

The leaflets are available to download from [www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://www.allaboutpets.org.uk).

Why not visit the website to see the full range of leaflets and enjoy the many features, such as:

- articles
- events near you
- latest news
- photo sharing
- online chat and more

## The Blue Cross

*All About Pets* is brought to you by The Blue Cross – Britain's pet charity since 1897. Through our animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year, while our hospitals provide veterinary care for pets whose owners cannot afford private vets' fees.

## How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you for support. Any contribution you can give will make a difference to the animals in our care. **Please call 01993 822651 or visit [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk).**



THE BLUE CROSS

*Britain's pet charity*

All About Pets, The Blue Cross,  
FREEPOST NAT4336,  
BURFORD OX18 4BR  
[www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)

[www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://www.allaboutpets.org.uk)

Registered charity no: 224392

