

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



EUTHANASIA



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

The life expectancy of a pet cat is generally much longer than that of a cat living in the wild. On average a pet cat may live for about 15 years and some even survive well into their twenties. But at some stage it may become obvious that your cat's life is drawing to a close. It is then that you will face a difficult decision on whether your pet should be taken to your vet and put painlessly to sleep.



When is euthanasia necessary?

Euthanasia ('putting to sleep') is the term used by vets for the process of preventing the suffering of an animal that is too old or sick to have a fulfilled life. It is never an easy decision and many owners understandably delay making it for as long as possible. Pain is not the only form of suffering; quality of life is important too and there are a number of situations in which euthanasia is the kindest thing to do for your cat.

Consider euthanasia if your cat:

- is suffering untreatable pain from cancer
- is no longer able to eat or drink normally
- has such severe heart and lung disease that it is unable to breathe properly
- can no longer empty its bowels or bladder without pain or is incontinent
- is unable to stand or move normally
- has become so blind or deaf that it cannot cope with everyday living
- is ill and the emotional demands of caring for it are more than you can manage

What will happen?

Before euthanasia is carried out you will be asked to sign a consent form. Your vet may shave the fur from a patch of skin on one of your cat's front legs and will then insert a needle into a vein. An overdose of a drug which makes your cat lose consciousness will be administered. Your cat will be asleep in a very short time – breathing and heartbeat will stop a few seconds later. If your cat is fearful or aggressive it will often be given a sedative before the injection is given. Alternatively, in some very sick cats, the injection may be given into its belly, although this is sometimes slower to take effect.

Will my cat suffer?

Apart from a pinprick, the process is painless. In its last moments your cat may give a gasp. Your cat is asleep and the sound is caused by a muscular spasm that is perfectly normal. Other muscles in your cat's body may also twitch and, as its body relaxes, its bowels or bladder may empty. The eyes do not close.



Should I be there at the end?

Discuss in advance with your vet whether you wish to be with your cat when it is put to sleep. It may be less stressful for your cat to be able to hear a familiar voice. Knowing that your old friend suffered no pain and met a peaceful end may comfort you. However, if you are frightened or anxious your cat may sense this and may also become upset.

Vets usually prefer to see patients in their own clinic. However, euthanasia is a special situation and some vets may agree to make a home visit to do this.

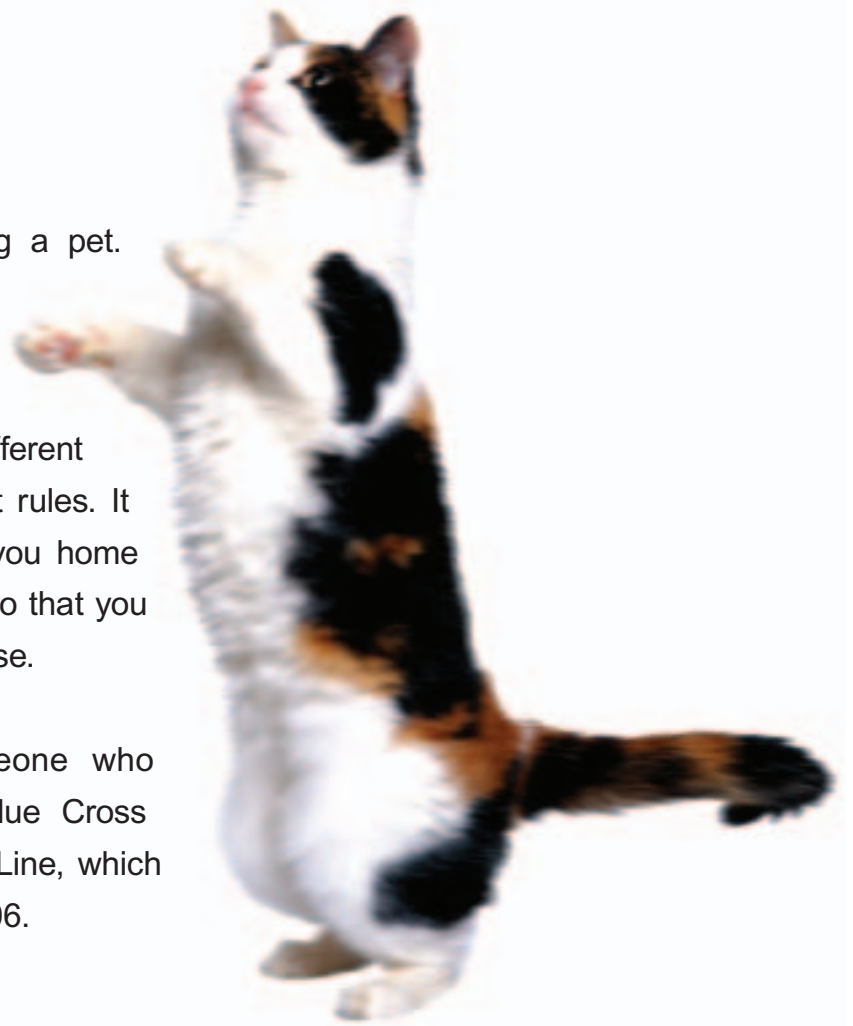
Who decides that the time is right for euthanasia?

You must decide whether euthanasia is the right thing for your cat. Your vet will be able to advise you on what the options are and make a sensible recommendation but he/she will not make the decision for you. If possible, make your choice after talking it over with your vet and with other members of your family, including children.

How will I feel?

It is natural to feel grief after losing a pet. Sometimes the first response to a pet's death is anger or guilt – that more could have been done to save it. However, people experience grief in different ways and there are no hard and fast rules. It may help to have someone to take you home after your cat has been put to sleep so that you do not have to return to an empty house.

It can be helpful to talk to someone who understands your feelings – The Blue Cross operates a Pet Bereavement Support Line, which can be contacted on tel. 0800 096 6606.



How will my children cope?

Losing a pet is often the first time that a child becomes aware of death. It is usually best to be honest with a child and explain the truth as clearly as you can. Children may want time to say goodbye to their pet and seeing the body may help them understand what has happened. Marking the occasion with some kind of memorial such as a burial can be very therapeutic.

What happens to the body?

Your vet will explain what can be done with your cat's body. They can arrange for your cat to be cremated, or you may choose to bury the body yourself. If you want to bury your cat in your garden check first with your local authority that this is allowed and make sure that the body is buried at least two feet (about 600mm) below the surface. If your cat is cremated it is usually possible for your vet to arrange for you to have its ashes returned, but you must inform them of your wishes at the time of euthanasia.

What happens if my pet dies unexpectedly at home?

If this happens, and you are unable to bury your pet, then contact your vet who will be happy to arrange cremation.

Should I get another pet?

After the experience of losing a cat some people say they never want to own another pet. However, many others find that getting another cat helps them deal with their grief. The relationship you build with another pet will never be the same as the one you had, but it can be equally rewarding.

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.

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