

Saying Goodbye to a Beloved Pet

Our topics for this week are:

- **Care for a debilitated pet**
- **Time of euthanasia**
- **Options for disposition of the pet's body**

Saying goodbye to a beloved pet is one of the major stressors in life. If the pet's decline is slow, the stress may be worse. Your primary mission should be to make the final days dignified, peaceful, and pain-free, as possible. Once maintaining dignity, peace, and freedom from pain is no longer possible, the time for euthanasia has come. However, there are no traffic lights for knowing when the time for euthanasia has occurred. It is easy to second-guess yourself that it is too early or after the pet is gone, that you waited too late. Emotions cloud judgment.

Some red lights that I suggest signal it is time for euthanasia of a pet are persistent lack of appetite, inability to stand when urinating or defecating, inability to rest in one position for more than 1 hour, pressure sores on bony prominences, always seeking to hide, resentfulness when being gently moved, or persistent difficulty in breathing.

Care of a Debilitated Pet

Prior to these end of life signs, special care of elderly or impaired pets is warranted. More frequent veterinary visits are advisable. Bedding should be in a draft-free, warm area and have plenty of cushioning. Monitoring for urine or fecal accidents should be routinely monitored by observation, smell, and if in doubt, touch to feel for wet bedding.

Palliative Care

When signs of debilitation occur without signs suggesting euthanasia as the only humane option, palliative care can be provided. Palliative care is similar to hospice. Pain should be controlled with medications, special diets may be necessary to encourage eating, and lots of gentle petting and soft words are beneficial. It is important to keep in mind that palliative care is not a replacement for euthanasia when signs indicate it is the final best option.

Euthanasia

Euthanasia literally means "good death". Veterinarians achieve this with controlled prescription drugs given intravenously. Sedatives may be given first depending on the mental state of the patient. Once the intravenous solution begins to be injected, death occurs within 10 to 20

seconds. During that 10 to 20 seconds, the animal relaxes, goes into a deep sleep as if for surgery, then the breathing and heart beats stops. There is no struggling or discomfort.

If the pet is not under palliative care and dies without euthanasia, its body will need to be cared for. An immediate trip to your veterinarian's office is best, but if a short delay is unavoidable, the body should be kept cool by placing it in a plastic bag and covering the body with bags of ice. If the pet is a large dog, it should not be covered or wrapped. The body should be placed on a concrete or tile floor in a cool room. If you wish to have a necropsy done, which is a veterinarian's inspection for cause of death, the body should not be frozen but it can and should be cooled.

Final Resting Condition

The final resting condition for the pet's body can be cremation. The request should specifically be for individual cremation. The pet's ashes can then be turned to the owner for final disposition by the owner. Another means of rapidly decomposing the body is biocremation, also called alkaline hydrolysis or aquamation. Rather than using flames, the body is rapidly decomposed with lye, water, heat (around 160 degrees, F), and pressure to prevent boiling.

If you own your own property, it may be legal for you to bury your pet on your own property. Otherwise, most communities have a relatively nearby pet cemetery.

Making a footprint of the pet with self-hardening clay as a permanent memento is a common practice before putting a pet to its final rest. Kits are available on Amazon and at local pet supply stores.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Palliative care should be provided to debilitated beloved pets.**
- 2. There are signs that a humane, dignified end of life for a beloved pet requires euthanasia.**
- 3. The most common means of disposition of a dead pet's body is cremation or burial.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and available from all major science book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 150 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.