



Caring for a cat with terminal cancer

Although various treatments are available for many types of cancer, sometimes treatment is not a good option. Decisions must be made to decide how best to care for your cat to ensure they have a good quality of life for as long as possible while they are still feeling well and are pain free. 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 cancer has been diagnosed, you will need to discuss with your vet how to care for your cat. In many cases, when your cat 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 cat is in pain and suffering.

Palliative care involves using medication to relieve pain and discomfort, including non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) such as meloxicam, opioid pain relievers, steroids such as prednisolone and sometimes local anaesthetics. It may also involve giving anti-nausea medication or appetite stimulants. Palliative care can make your cat more comfortable, giving you an opportunity to spend some quality time with your cat 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 cat 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 cat very much relies on its sense of smell so warming food and offering special treats can help to keep a cat eating well on its own. Cats really do not like to be force fed. It is also very important to ensure that cats have plenty of opportunities to drink liquids so they do not become dehydrated. Multiple water bowls with fresh and/or flowing water, chicken stock or other tasty broths can encourage cats to take in enough liquids. For cats that need a little bit extra, you can learn how to give sterile fluids under the skin (sub-cutaneous or sub-cut fluids) at home. There are several guides available free of charge for pet owners on the Cat Professionals website (http://www.vetprofessionals.com/catprofessional/free_downloads.html).

For many cats with cancer, they are otherwise well but the location of the cancer may mean that one aspect of their life is poor. As a pet owner, you know your cat 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. Many owners report that their only regret was in waiting too long before ending their cat's suffering.

When is it time to say good-bye?

Sadly, there will come a time when your cat 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. As cats are both a predator and a prey species, they tend to hide the fact that they are not feeling well. It is also important to remember that purring is not a sign that your cat is free from pain, as even an injured or dying cat may purr. If your cat 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 cat over several weeks to see how they are responding to any treatment you are giving them. A “good” day might be one where your cat spends some time curled up enjoying the sunshine coming in through the window, manages toileting in the litterbox, does a bit of grooming and eats and drinks without too much coaxing. A “bad” day might be one where you cannot tempt your cat to eat or drink much, there may have a toileting accident or straining to do any eliminations. When the bad days outweigh the good, you will know that it is time to start making 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. For many cats, the diagnosis of cancer will lead to their death. While we would all like our cats to die in their sleep, this is extremely uncommon and most cats 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 cat 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 cat. However, it also gives us 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 The Ralph Site, Cats protection, HelpGuide.org, Blue Cross for Pets, the RSPCA and many other organisations including our website. The Animal Cancer Trust website also hosts a Survivors Celebrated Gallery where you can post your pet's story of living with cancer as well as a Friends Remembered Gallery where you can upload a photo and tribute to your pet when they pass on.

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 ACT, 49 Station Rd, Polegate, East Sussex, BN26 6EA. Telephone 03003 110 310. Visit www.animalcancertrust.co.uk for more information.