

## AN OLD GUY'S EXPERIENCE WITH HIS PET'S EUTHANASIA

You're considering pet euthanasia. You wouldn't be here otherwise! If reading this is an urgent personal exploration for you, I'm sorry. It's never an easy thing to deal with. However, you might as well know right now, that for me, in-home euthanasia of my beloved companion animal was by far, the better of the two options available to me. This article is intended to tell you why I feel that way, and to help you make your own decisions. Be aware that I chose to be blunt and somewhat graphic in my descriptions of what you may experience. Sometimes our vets want to protect us from worrying about the things that probably won't happen anyway, but I figure that forewarned is forearmed. If like me, you're one of those people, then please, read on!

So--- I'm not a veterinarian, I'm just an old pet owner. At least I'm old enough that my spouse and I have experienced the anguish of sending multiple beloved dogs across the "rainbow bridge" at the end of their own story with us. We've always kept two dogs at the same time, so in my adult life, I've struggled through four versions of the euthanasia experience and yet it never got any easier. Each time felt like the first. Each time brought new issues, obstacles and outright horrors. I felt the same heart-ache, the same self-doubt, the same guilt, the same profound sense of helpless loss. I offer you my empathy and my sincere sympathy. We have a new dog and sadly, he won't live forever. Even as experienced as I have become, I know that life (and death) can offer surprises.

I hope that reading about the process in advance will be helpful because maybe some of the information will actually stick and be available when it's needed at a critical and emotional moment. All too often people are dealing with the onslaught of emotion and new information in a moment of sudden crisis, when they are least able to absorb and understand it. I doubt that you will be receptive to a canine physiology lesson from a vet when you're horrified by the sudden movement of the dog you thought had passed. By reading this and any other information you can find, you are preparing yourself and your pet, for a better experience.

Two of my personal experiences with animal euthanasia (our dogs Mies and Duffy) were in a veterinary clinic and two (Frank and Milo) were at home. The circumstances of each location are very different and often it is not a choice you are even able to make. Each of the two basic possibilities; clinic versus home, has its own unique benefits and disadvantages. I suspect that you're reading this because you do in fact, face the choice between these two end-of life scenarios for your beloved companion and the location is your first decision to be made among many. It can be a tough choice. I've been there and done that. Euthanasia of your beloved companion animal is both an emotional and an intellectual decision. Try to balance the two for yourself and try to have realistic expectations during this extremely difficult process. Your careful choice of where this will happen and your own advance knowledge and understanding of the technical process of euthanasia and the physical process of dying, can save you the unnecessary emotional overload from sudden self-doubt, misinterpreting what you think you see happening and overreacting to what you are feeling as a result.

Of my personal experience with the two options for location, and speaking only for myself, I've come to know that home euthanasia was the best for me and for my pets. Recently we chose in-home euthanasia for our seventeen year old, terminally ill Westie, Milo. Seventeen years of joy had finally wound down to our obligation to declare an end. I found it frustrating that my veterinarian would not tell us what to do. The final decision was clearly going to be ours and I just didn't want that responsibility. I had felt there was so little that I had been in control of, and that end-of-life decision was the one detail I didn't want to control!

However the final decision regarding death must be your own. Your vet can't tell you when a life must end except under the most dire circumstances when your pet is in extreme discomfort. Only one of my experiences was like that. Our dog Mies had an unknown internal rupture and was in severe shock. Immediate euthanasia was the only available option. Most of the time, things are not that clearly defined.

There are a number of details you should know about pet euthanasia so you can make an informed decision. Euthanasia is a medical procedure. It can be simple and it can become complicated. Some people are just not emotionally prepared to be present for the necessary realities of needles and blood and the unknowns of chemical reactions within the body of your pet. Genetic predisposition and physical illness of your pet can provide unexpected complications that must be addressed quickly and decisively. You've probably been through a lot already with medical procedures and decisions. If you're like I was, you feel manipulated, out of control and certain of nothing. It's just plain painful to see your pet going through more apparent suffering and indignity.

Please believe that freeing your pet from fear and pain is your vet's primary consideration from the very start of the euthanasia process. Everything they do will be approached from this intention. However, if you can't handle the emotion of being a witness to and potential participant in the process, please consider finding someone to act on your behalf at the actual euthanasia. Because euthanasia is a medical procedure, it isn't helpful when you clutch at your pet and wail like a baby, refusing to let go. More than once, it has taken every fiber of my being to move away from my beloved ball of fur, to allow for the technical procedure that must be done. It's difficult. It hurts. It must be done if you want your pet to die easily and with dignity.

Euthanasia in your vet clinic mostly removes you from the medical parts of the procedure and puts a veil between you and the technical and "icky" aspects. Home euthanasia allows you to have full exposure to the complete and potentially unpredictable process.

The procedure will often go something like this: first, you will be required to sign a release allowing for the death of your pet. Be prepared, because that alone, can feel like a punch in the gut. In a clinic, your pet may be taken into a separate place to be sedated so that they will feel no pain or fear during the next part of the process. In this case, when the pet is fully unconscious, skin will be shaved if necessary and then an intravenous catheter will be inserted in a vein to allow the quick and easy injection of the euthanasia drug in your presence (if that's what you have requested.) Except for the initial sedation, this very much like when you have your own blood drawn for a diagnostic test. Your pet will be brought to you alive, but fully unconscious, with the catheter taped in place. There is a very important reason for this, but it is something that your vet clinic will probably not tell you. By doing the sedation and inserting the catheter in another room, you'll avoid seeing the sometimes messy process of inserting the intravenous catheter. Sometimes an animal will cry out from the "pinch" of the sedation injection. Even the smallest whimper of your pet at this emotional time can feel like a knife through your heart. Once your pet is unconscious, it can take multiple attempts to find a tiny vein, but it is critical that the catheter is securely placed in a free flow of blood so that the euthanasia will be as fast as possible. Old age and illness can make finding a vein an even more difficult process and depending on your own emotional strength, you may be far better off not seeing this small bit of medical drama. A clinical setting protects you from any emotional trauma during this process. However, in the clinic, the bad part for me was knowing that my little sweetie was sedated and fell into unconscious sleep in someone else's arms, or even worse, on a steel table. Even though I held him for the final injection, I knew he was unaware of my presence. His last conscious moment was not spent with me. If you are concerned about that, tell your vet you want to hold your pet for the sedation and then allow the

catheter to be placed in another room out of your sight. Within reason, you can shape your experience, but please remember and respect that clinics can have their own way of doing things.

At home your pet can always be sedated while in your own arms, sharing your loving gaze and hearing your voice. A simple injection under the skin is all it takes so she can fall into happily snoring slumber without fear, in familiar comfort. (Even though our Milo yelped at the initial injection, it was a sweet comfort for us to quickly hear our old guy snore so loudly and contentedly under the sedation and it made us smile.) The bad part is that you must now choose whether to participate in what must come next.

As I mentioned above, it's usually necessary to insert an intravenous catheter. Even though your friend is now oblivious to pain, it can feel like torture for you to watch. You will learn why your vet clinic doesn't do this with you watching. The in-home veterinarian you've chosen, must do a delicate needle procedure which is made more complicated by the burden of your own watching presence. It may take multiple attempts to hit a vein and you will see blood when they succeed. (Our dog Milo was one of these situations. The effects of sedation, plus his small size, advanced age and terminal illness, all contributed to the reality that it was very difficult to find a functional vein for the catheter.) No amount of veterinary experience and expertise is guaranteed to eliminate the difficulties which can arise. Sometimes ignorance really is bliss, so you might consider going for a glass of water during the time that's required for this critical part of the process. You can return to participate in the final moments while the euthanasia drug is administered.

Sometimes certain specific situations and conditions can require an abdominal injection. This variation will take considerably longer for the drug to act. The process is far more unpredictable and it will probably test your emotional fortitude. Your vet can explain this in detail, but in my own opinion, your personal fear of catheter needles and blood isn't a good enough reason to make your pet's death take longer than it otherwise could. Regardless of the euthanasia method that is required, if you choose to watch, the longer it takes, the more your imagination can run wild and you may feel certain that your pet shares your horror at what is happening. (She doesn't!) It's too easy to forget that your sedated friend feels no pain and that your own emotional reaction is a normal part of the process. Also- please remember that your vet shares your emotional discomfort over the situation if it becomes complicated and difficult. (This isn't really any easier for them to see than it is for you.)

Of course, what comes next is the really hard stuff, the unknown stuff, the part you'll hate the most. The final passing of your pet can manifest in unpredictable ways. Even with the drug given through an IV catheter, the time before passing can vary. Various pets react differently to the drugs that can be used. Drugs can vary in how quickly they act. In my own experiences, Mies and Frank passed nearly instantly, Milo lingered just briefly, completely relaxed and still. But my Duffy was a different story. It seemed that Duffy took a traumatic eternity to pass, even though it was probably no more than three or four minutes. If you're like me, you'll probably think and feel that it takes forever for death to come. Somehow time seems to pass slowly in a moment of anguish and loss. There are so many variables in this process that it's nearly impossible for your vet to predict what will happen. Old Duffy's passing nearly broke my heart as he gasped and shuddered two times, even after his heart had supposedly stopped. A vet calls this horror, "agonal gasping" which I think is an appropriate name due to the agony it caused me as I held him in my arms. I've since learned that these gasps are actually a sign of death: they occur after the animal's heart has stopped beating and are caused by the diaphragm of the animal contracting spasmodically as the animal's brain and muscles are deprived of oxygen. Agonal gasps are a reflex and they are not painful for your pet, because your pet is in fact, no longer alive. However, you can see how easily this can be misinterpreted. Like me, few people are willing to hear a detailed textbook explanation from the vet during such an emotional moment when

they believe their dear friend is alive and suffering. Be aware: your love and passion for your friend can cause you unnecessary anguish. I put myself through an emotional wringer before I finally read a scholarly and detailed description of agonal gasping.

There are any number of things that can seem gut-wrenching to you and yet your vet may not seem bothered. You may absolutely believe that your pet is still alive when your vet says it is not. Your pet may arch its back or become suddenly stiff before going totally limp. Your pet's muscles and tongue may tremble all over. The eyes may flutter. It might look like she's shuddering. To you it may look like a reaction to severe pain, but it isn't. These actions are normal muscle responses to loss of oxygenation. It usually passes very quickly, but your emotional reaction can send you into panic. Try to stay calm. Sometimes a vet feels they must act according to your visible distress and sense of urgency, rather than look uncaring. They may feel forced into unnecessary actions on your behalf. Your vet has likely been through this many times. Trust them, and try very hard, to quietly follow their lead. Your vet knows how much you are hurting!

Sometimes when breathing becomes shallow and the pulse goes "thready" it can be difficult to know when your friend is finally gone. Give yourself time and don't expect to have an immediate sense of your pet's passing. My experience has proved to me that sometimes it's obvious and sometimes it's not. Sometimes death is a grand performance and sometimes it's nearly imperceptible.

Other, more mundane aspects will affect your choice between home or clinic for this experience.

It seems to me that people often have powerful and lingering sentimental reactions to the physical place where a pet passed away. You may not want to think of your pet passing in your own home. You may feel haunted by the memory of the experience in your own living room or garden. A clinical setting allows you to walk away and more easily forget. However, my own feelings were less important than the last moments of comfort for our own animal companions. On the two occasions where the choice of location was ours to make, we chose our home, in the living room where we had spent so much time together. We felt it was a far better choice for us, in comparison to the clinical experience. It doesn't bother us to know that now, as we watch a movie, we sit where two of our friends have died. Actually it's a comfort to remember. Will you feel that way?

Consider transportation issues during this very stressful time. Having the vet come to us meant there was no seemingly endless drive to and from the clinic, fighting off flowing tears all the while. It's just not safe to drive and cry at the same time! (If you choose the clinic, find an emotionally-detached friend to do the driving.) Think ahead about what you'll do when you get home as you walk into a familiar space where your animal companion is conspicuously absent.

Consider what comes next, after the in-home euthanasia. If your local laws allow, you may keep the body for burial, otherwise the vet will either remove the body for cremation or arrange for transportation by others. Cremation is considered to be "final" disposal and you may do what you wish with the ashes. If you choose to remain with your pet after passing, there are a few more things you should know. Place your pet's body on something disposable and absorbent. Don't leave her on the couch! As a pet's body relaxes, there may be slight twitching or a release of fluids. Over time, his bowels may evacuate. Depending on what illness caused you to choose euthanasia, fluids may be released by mouth and from other body orifices. You may find that if your pet's eyes were open at passing, they won't stay closed even if you have the courage to attempt to move the lids. The realities of physical death are so much different than what you may have seen in movies and on TV. Be prepared for this and understand it as natural and normal. If you feel distressed

following the procedure, ask your vet for further information when you are in a more balanced emotional state.

Your best support in a crisis is the preparation and learning you have done in advance. Most often, the things that might alarm you during the process of euthanasia are normal variations. Your pet's physical comfort and freedom from fear will have been your veterinarian's primary consideration both during treatment and during the final moments. Your own feelings matter to the vet as well, but it's your responsibility to understand as much as you can about the process in which you've chosen to participate. Try to see the situation from all angles. Vets are humans and all medical professionals have their own "bedside manner." In two of my experiences the vet cried right along with us. In the other two, the vet seemed cool and detached, and yet I can fully understand that whether it can be seen or not, veterinarians have their own emotions to manage as best they can. Vets go to school to learn to preserve and enhance a pet's life. It's a brave few who choose euthanasia as the focus of their profession. I'm glad they're available to us.

One more thing can cloud your rational mind in the euthanasia process. In every previous interaction with your vet, the point has been to prolong life. No matter how bad things got, somewhere in the back of your mind you preserved a shred of hope that your friend could return to some version of well-being. The euthanasia visit is different and that's so easy to deny. This visit is about death and letting go. Be realistic with yourself about that awful truth. However, please remember that by eliminating pain and suffering, you are doing your pet the biggest favor of its life. Even though, years later we still miss our animal friends, our memories of home euthanasia still feel comforting for us and we feel certain it was far more comforting for our pets. We were able to take time for grieving with the body, and nobody was there to see us blubber like the emotional wrecks we were.

I hope you aren't offended by my lack of sugar coating in this article. Pet euthanasia is never fun. Death is brutal even in the best of circumstances and I believe you are best prepared by the plain facts. Please remember that I'm not an expert, I can only tell you what I have learned from my own anguished experiences.

It's also OK if you just can't be closely involved in the passing of your pet. Your clinic may then be your best choice and they will make it as trauma-free for you as they are able. You can even formally assign someone to act on your behalf. If you choose home for this experience, consider carefully whether or not you will choose to watch the entire, detailed medical process of euthanasia, and please consider what parts of the process you will allow children to see. As I've said, sometimes, "ignorance is bliss" and although you now may know more than you had wanted, ultimately I believe that "knowledge is power!"

My closing advice is to weigh your options in detail, remembering that not everyone can afford "heroic" medical intervention. The depth of your wallet is a valid factor in your decision. Read as much as you can. Learn as much as you need to know. Ask lots of questions. Pay for second and third opinions if that's what you need for your own self-confidence. Meditate or pray. Talk to friends. Do whatever you can to focus your mind and intentions to the noble purpose that euthanasia really is. Don't leave yourself open to self-doubt. Your emotional peace will come through your confidence that you did the best you could, with only the resources you had available to you at the time.

When choosing between in-home or in-clinic pet euthanasia, I believe that either decision is honorable and dignified, but personally, I believe that home is the best place for anyone's life to end.

I have felt the pain you feel and I wish you well.