



PET TALK

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PALLIATIVE CARE IN HOUSEHOLD PETS

What is Palliative Care?

Palliative Care, as defined by the World Health Organization, is “symptom management and end-of-life care.” In household pets, this phrase has become increasingly common as medical breakthroughs and advances in technology are providing companion animals and their owners with more treatment options to extend the lives of their pets well into their senior years. While it is wonderful to have your family member and companion around for several more years, there are now of a plethora of commonly occurring geriatric disease states to contend with while caring for the family dog or cat. When the time arises, palliative care, based on your pet’s specific requirements, may include the following: home or outpatient care, pain management, easy access to food and water, wound care, a stable environment, mental stimulation, good hygiene plus sanitation which includes clean bedding with ample padding.

Why do Pets Need Palliative Care?

As your pet enters their senior years, diseases of aging may begin to emerge in your once very healthy active pet. Now they don’t move as much, begin to demonstrate signs of generalized pain, and pant after merely climbing up the short flight of steps into the house. It is important to remember that these diseases often occur together and can be recognized early on with proper annual visits to your veterinarian. In fact, a senior pet should actually be visiting the vet twice yearly in order to help control disease progression and regulate symptoms. Geriatric pets can develop many of the same problems seen in older people such as diabetes, arthritis, heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease, and cancer. Procedures your veterinarian

may perform include a thorough physical exam looking for changes in body condition, assessing pain, blood work, making changes to your pet’s diet due to different nutritional needs, weight loss considerations, and a dental workup. All of these areas combined help create a plan for senior care and perhaps palliative care when the time arises.



What Makes a Pet a “Senior”?

Depending on the breed and size of your dog, senior status can vary. Several studies have been conducted and suggest that memory and learning deficits may be found around 7 years of age while actual brain damage is found in those greater than 12 years of age. Similarly, research shows that cats are seniors around 7 to 11 years of age. In humans, middle age is considered 42 to 45 years and this is when wellness-screenings begin which equates to approximately 7.5 years in dogs and cats (with the exception of large breed dogs who reach middle age 1 to 2 years earlier).

Signs of aging you may notice include:

- increased anxiety
- increased or decreased reaction to sounds
- disorientation or confusion
- increased aggressiveness or protective behavior
- house soiling
- decreased self-hygiene
- increased wandering

-decreased response to commands
-changes in sleep cycles
Disease-specific changes you may note include:

Diabetes

- Increased thirst and urination
- Weight loss
- Cataracts

Arthritis:

- Limb favoring
- Difficulty standing
- Hesitancy to run, jump or climb stairs
- Less alert and irritable

Heart Disease

- Coughing
- Exercise intolerance
- Shortness of breath
- Loss of appetite

Kidney Disease

- Decreased appetite
- Decreased urination
- Vomiting

Hepatic Disease

- Abdominal swelling
- Yellow membranes
- Abnormally colored feces
- Chronic weight loss

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Sand Run Pharmacy

40 Sand Run Rd.
Akron, OH 44313

Hours of Operation

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Closed Sunday

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Cancer

- Abnormal swellings that persist or continue to grow
- Difficulty eating or swallowing
- Weight loss
- Sores that don't heal
- Loss of stamina



Role of the Veterinary Pharmacist

Often times when dealing with an older pet, a new medication may be added to the daily regimen or medications that once worked may need dosing or dosage form changes. Your veterinary pharmacist is happy to help you and your pet during these times of change. Pharmacists can offer correctly compounded medications such as solutions or suspensions that are particularly useful in animals that can't chew; for example the aged Dachshund or Chihuahua who has no teeth. These same compounds can be flavored to increase palatability and since you know their favorite flavors, it's a great way to be personally involved in the care of your pet. Your pharmacist will ask you, "Is your animal taking its medication readily or does another dosage form need to be created?" They will also counsel you on how to properly administer medications, especially if it's a subcutaneous injection, transdermal gel, or even a patch. Your pharmacist will also discuss possible side effects that you may need to watch for in your pet while they are on certain medications. For those animals who are on several medications, your pharmacist will probably offer counseling on pill boxes that people often use for daily, weekly, or even monthly quantities. Talking with your veterinary pharmacist about your pet and their medica-

tions can better ensure that the medications will be delivered efficiently, safely, and without interactions for the best outcome possible.

What is Quality-of-Life?

This topic has been discussed and reviewed at length by many human and veterinary professionals over the years without a concrete answer. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes this abstract phenomenon as, "an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns." Integral to the concept of QOL is the individual's state of overall health, defined by the WHO as, "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease." However, when assessing quality of life in our pets, there is no specific definition or method for assessing the QOL. In order to assess this parameter adequately and objectively, your veterinarian will likely examine your pet's 4 critical vital signs: temperature, pulse, respiration, and pain. They may also assess your animal's nutritional status too. There is a scale created by veterinarian Dr. Alice Villaobos that focuses on the owner side of analyzing Quality of Life using HHHHHMM: Hurt, Hunger, Hydration, Hygiene, Happiness, Mobility, and More Good Days Than Bad. Each category is based on a 1-10 scale, where 1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest (ideal) and a minimum score of 35 is considered acceptable. By giving numbers to various aspects of your pet's life, it's easier for you and your veterinarian to objectively discuss and care for your pet.

1. Hurt

- The first parameter since pain control is critical
- Ease of pet's breathing is included here

2. Hunger

- Is your animal receiving proper nutrition willingly, by hand or force feeding, or not at all?
- Alternatives, like tube feeding, may be an option to discuss with your veterinarian

3. Hydration

- Is your animal drinking water on its own or refusing water even when offered by hand?

4. Hygiene

- Can your animal be brushed and cleaned?
- Especially an issue in cats who normally self-groom

5. Happiness

- Is your animal happy, average, dull, or depressed?
- Does your cat still purr when petted or does your dog still wag his tail when you walk into the room?
- Owners are excellent at analyzing this category as you can note best enjoyment or distress in your pet's eyes or facial expressions

6. Mobility

- Can your pet move around on its own or is he stumbling, falling, or experiencing seizures?
- A sling or ramp from your veterinarian may be useful

7. More Good Days Than Bad

- How many healthy active days you're your pet have as opposed to dull or painful days?
- Keeping a daily journal allows you to tell your vet how many days your cat missed her meals or how often during the week your dog had diarrhea and trouble getting up and down

This HHHHHMM scale doesn't necessarily have to be used and is only a point of reference, but the idea is to realize the importance of assessing all aspects of your pet's life and sometimes a scale with numbers can give clarity to a very difficult situation so you can look at your animal objectively not subjectively which is difficult when emotions are involved.

What is Hospice?

Veterinary hospice, when offered within the context of a veterinary practice, is an option for owners who want a dignified death for a terminally ill companion animal and this program allows for preparation of the death of their

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animal. As in the case of human hospice programs, patients must have a terminal illness with a short life expectancy usually less than 6 months. Dr. Golab of the AVMA Animal Welfare Division explains, "hospice goes beyond providing a mechanism to administer fluids to animals with kidney failure. It's not just about prolonging an animal's life; it's about making sure that animal's quality of life is good. This means there's a professional checking on the animal on a regular basis." Unlike human hospices, pet hospices don't need a license to operate so while the concept has been around for roughly 20 years, there is the concern for well-meaning individuals lacking adequate skills and resources to offer a proper hospice environment which is not "the place for someone who just wants to hug dying animals," spoken matter-of-factly by director of animal welfare and protection at Animal Rescue League in Boston, Dr. Gary Patronek. The American Veterinary Medical Association points out, "Hospice care allows terminally ill animals to live comfortably at home or in a facility and this does not preclude euthanasia." The AVMA suggests addressing the following topics with your veterinarian before entering into a hospice arrangement:

- fees should be discussed and agreed upon before hospice service is provided
 - household dynamic suitability for providing adequate care for the severity of your pet's illness versus keeping your pet at a clinic
 - animals must be kept sanitary and as pain free as possible
 - does a death occurring at home need confirmation and pronouncement of death by the attending veterinarian
 - euthanasia services should be available if you and your veterinarian at any time believe this is appropriate.
- Optimally, veterinary care should be available at all times of the day or night. If your pet will need referral due to these circumstances, details about this should be explained to the you and the referring veterinarian in advance so

that everyone feels comfortable with the issues that may need to be addressed.

Where Are These Programs Located?



Asking your trusted veterinarian or veterinary pharmacist is a good place to start. Many Colleges of Veterinary Medicine also have references for nearby hospice care facilities or may in fact offer these services themselves. The actual cost of palliative therapy and hospice care are both veterinary and program specific. It depends on the level of care being received (palliative vs. end-of-life), the location of the patient (inpatient, outpatient, at home), how many medications the pet is taking, and will there need to be an on-call referring in addition to the fees of the regular veterinarian's palliative or hospice care. There is a Pet Loss Support Services list at the end of this newsletter with several websites that can be referred to for further information.

Euthanasia

This is perhaps the hardest topic to discuss. The question ultimately becomes, when is this decision the best answer for pet and owner? As with quality-of-life assessment, there is no standard or cut-off but usually lies within the veterinarian and owner assessments of how the animal is progressing. When the 4 critical vital signs discussed earlier are diminishing and the score of the HHHHMM test is decreasing, objectively this would appear appropriate. Your animal has developed a loss of bladder control, can no longer ambulate on his own, and is essentially unable to eat, so a peaceful euthanasia sounds like the best option. However, you as the owner may still not be ready to let go. For this reason, when an animal starts palliative care or hospice, talking about euthanasia from the beginning is appropriate, albeit very

sad, so it doesn't come as such a shock when the time arises. Also, as your pet begins palliative care or hospice, there are hotlines you can call for free grief counseling as listed below. Many owners find that being able to talk to others about what they're going through helps in this process. Ideally, when it comes to palliative care, hospice, and perhaps euthanasia, the whole picture is looked at analyzing overall health, quality of life, vital signs, your veterinarians advice, and of course your own personal feelings on how your pet feels. Often times, it is more humane to euthanize a pet rather than the alternative; trying to get 5 medications into cat with painful oral cancer; carrying a severely arthritic Weimeraner with 3-legs due to an amputation from osteosarcoma in and out of the house several times daily; inability to control a very small Yorkie's pain. If you choose to be present during your pet's euthanasia as many owners often are, your veterinarian should inform you about the process and what will happen so that their passing is as peaceful and stress-free as possible.



Pet Loss Support Services

1. ASPCA Pet Loss Support Hotline
-877-474-3310
-ASPCA.org
2. Washington State University
-1-866-266-8635
-www.vetmed.wsu.edu/plhl/
3. Tufts University
-508-839-7966
-www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss/
4. Cornell University
-607-253-3932
-www.vet.cornell.edu/org/petloss/
5. University of Florida
-352-294-4430
6. www.rainbowsbridge.com
7. www.aplb.org
8. www.deltasociety.org
9. www.angelesgate.com
10. www.pethospice.org

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