

End of life, grief and loss

cats.org.uk



This guide is to help you understand how to assess your cat's quality of life, what happens at euthanasia and the after-death care options available, as well as supporting you in coping with your grief.



Assessing quality of life

The average life expectancy of a cat is around 12 years but many cats live well beyond this age. As a pet owner, it is important that you are able to assess your cat's quality of life in order to prevent suffering as they get older, or if they become ill.

Illnesses are not the only form of suffering. Sometimes signs that a cat has a poor quality of life can be more subtle. They may be withdrawn or can no longer display normal behaviours such as grooming or play. Assessing quality of life is not always easy, so ask for support and guidance from your vet. Your vet will examine your cat and recommend any further tests or treatments needed. Depending on the diagnosis you may need to carefully consider the quality of your cat's life. An open discussion with your vet will allow them to provide guidance on the treatment options available, what might be right for your cat and whether it is time to consider euthanasia.

You may need to make an assessment of your cat's quality of life if they:

- can no longer eat or drink normally
- are unable to stand or move normally
- have difficulty breathing properly
- are badly injured in an accident

- are incontinent
- have an untreatable behavioural problem that leaves them feeling very unhappy
- have any condition that causes uncontrollable pain

The bond between owner and cat is very special. It is understandable that you will want to keep your cat alive, even if their quality of life begins to deteriorate. However, if there comes a time when your cat is in pain, discomfort or distress, and treatment to alleviate this is not possible, the most loving and courageous way you can show them how much you care is to end their suffering.

What is euthanasia?

The word euthanasia comes from the Greek term euthanatos which means a 'good death', ending a life to relieve pain and suffering. It's also often referred to as putting a pet to sleep or putting a pet down. The primary purpose of euthanasia is to relieve your cat's suffering in a way which is as painless as possible.

How is euthanasia carried out?

Discuss in advance with your vet whether you wish to be with your cat when they are euthanased.

It may be comforting for your cat if they can hear a familiar voice and have your presence to soothe them. However, it is understandable why some people feel it is just too difficult or that if they are frightened or anxious a cat may sense this and become upset. We are all different so the best advice is to do what you feel will be best for you and your cat.

Before euthanasia is carried out, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Some vets may give an injection of sedative, which will relax and sedate your cat, before injecting the euthanasia medication. The euthanasia medication will cause your cat to lose consciousness or become more deeply sedated, and then stop their heart beating. It is given by injection, and the injection can be given in different ways; this will depend on your cat's needs. Your vet may shave the fur from a patch of skin on your cat's front leg and inject either through a needle or into an intravenous catheter. Some vets may give the injection into another area, such as the tummy. Other than the brief pinprick sensation of the needle, the injection should cause no pain or discomfort.

Once the euthanasia medication has been given, your cat will pass away very quickly. As your cat loses consciousness, they may take a deep breath, or gasp.

Occasionally there may be a brief involuntary twitching after death has occurred. These are not signs of life; they are reflexes that occur naturally when a cat passes away. As the body relaxes, your cat's bowels or bladder may empty. Their eyes will not close.

Your vet will check for a heartbeat or eyelid reflex and may place your cat into a sleeping position.

After euthanasia

Sometimes it isn't possible to make decisions about after-death care in advance. However, where it is possible it can be helpful to think about the options available when you are not in a state of distress surrounding the loss of your cat. There are a variety of options available regarding what you would like to do with your cat's body and how you might like to memorialise your cat. For example, deciding whether to bury or cremate your cat's body and the different options for each, which may depend on your personal circumstances and preferences.

You may want to talk to your veterinary practice to find out what options they have available to you, however some people like to arrange after-death care themselves. The Association of Private Pet Cemeteries and Crematoria website has further details: appcc.org.uk

Generally after death, pets are cremated or buried.

Cremation

Your vet can arrange for your cat to be cremated, or you can take their body to your chosen pet crematorium yourself. Communal cremation and individual cremation is explained on the next page. You will need to inform your vet of your wishes at the time of euthanasia if you want your vet to arrange the cremation.

If your cat dies unexpectedly at home and you do not wish to bury them in your garden, contact your vet who can arrange cremation.

Communal cremation: This is where several animals are cremated together and the ashes will not usually be returned to the owner. Sometimes the ashes are scattered or buried on-site or may be taken elsewhere. The crematorium should be able to tell you what happens at their site if you wish to know. Many crematoria and cremation services will allow pet owners to visit them and see the facilities so that you can know exactly what will happen to your cat during cremation.

Individual cremation: This is a more personal option and you will usually have the option to have your cat's ashes returned to you. In an individual cremation a pet may be cremated in the crematorium on their own or, more commonly, on a separate tray from other pets.

If it is important to you that your cat is cremated individually then do ask about the process at your veterinary practice's preferred cremation service or your chosen crematorium. You may be able to choose the type of container to have the ashes kept in. Some facilities may offer different designs. Ask to see a brochure if possible so that you can choose. Individual cremations are generally more expensive than communal cremations so do ask your veterinary practice or chosen crematorium about the costs involved.

Please also be aware that collecting your cat's ashes can be a difficult thing to do. Some people are not able to collect their cat's ashes immediately as it feels too raw for them. Perhaps ask a friend or family member to come with you for support or to collect them on your behalf. Usually the veterinary practice or crematorium is happy to look after the ashes for a period of time until you feel able to collect them.

Home burial

Some people prefer to take their cat's body home to bury in the garden. There is no formal planning required for burying a cat at the home they lived in as long as you own the land and the vet has said that there is no risk to other animals or people.

If in doubt, speak to your local authority or search [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)

The grave should be at least 1.25 metres deep and the site should be three metres away from water sources, cables and pipes where possible. This is because the drug used to euthanase can enter the environment and damage other life forms.

Often people plant a bush or tree over the spot or place a pot or slab over the site to mark it. In any case, a heavy object should be placed on top of the site until the ground settles to deter scavenging animals from digging in that area. It is recommended the cat's body is also buried either in a plastic covering, a metal box, or a wooden box.

The benefits of burying at home include being able to visit your cat at any time and you may feel closer to your cat being at home. However, you might think about whether you are likely to move home in the future and what this might mean in terms of either relocating your cat's remains or leaving them behind.

Pet cemeteries

Choosing a pet cemetery is another option if you don't have the facility to bury at home or do not want cremation. While it can be an expensive service, it is often very personal. Most ceremonies can be accompanied by a short memorial service. Often costs will include purchase of the plot, an annual maintenance or rental fee and a coffin (which the cemetery may ask that you buy from them).

Coping with your loss

For many people the loss of their cat is as traumatic and emotionally challenging as the loss of any other family member. Whatever the circumstances of your loss, it is likely that you will be grieving. Grief is a unique and individual experience and while it is perfectly normal to grieve for the loss of a loved one, there is no normal way to grieve, neither is there a time limit on the process.

It may be that your beloved cat hasn't yet died and you are anticipating (perhaps dreading) their death; perhaps you have a very difficult decision to make and are struggling with how you will get through this. This type of situation often brings anticipatory grief, a type of grieving that starts even before your cat has died. Losing a much-loved cat can be a very difficult experience and you may feel overwhelmed by thoughts and feelings as the world carries on around you. You may feel very alone in your grief, as if nobody will understand. Making the decision to end your cat's life can feel like a huge responsibility and may leave you with complicated feelings and thoughts as you grieve your loss and reflect over what has happened.

Sharing how you feel with someone who understands how important your cat is to you can bring you comfort and help you cope with painful emotions.

You could talk to a friend, family member or one of our trained Cats Protection volunteer listeners who can provide both emotional support and practical information. Our free and confidential Paws to Listen grief support line is available on the number or email below:

0800 024 94 94

pawstolisten@cats.org.uk

Find out more information at
cats.org.uk/paws-to-listen

If you need to speak to someone outside of our opening hours, the Samaritans are available anytime on 116 123. If your grief becomes complex or prolonged, and you're not coping, please do get in touch with your GP for additional support.

Children and grief

Losing a pet is often the first time that a child becomes aware of death. You are the best judge of how much information your children can handle about death and the loss of their pet. It is usually best to be honest with a child and explain the truth as clearly as you can. You may find by being direct with them about your pet's death, you may be able to address any fears and perceptions they have about death.

Try not to use phrases like ‘put to sleep’ with children as this can be confusing, especially for younger ones. They might think their cat is resting and will wake up again later. It’s also best not to tell them your cat has gone to live elsewhere, as your child might think it’s their fault the cat has gone or might hope they return. Encourage your child to talk about their feelings and don’t be afraid to share yours too. However, don’t force a child to talk about their emotions if they don’t feel ready or able to.

Children may want time to say goodbye to their pet and seeing the body may help them understand what has happened, if you feel this is appropriate for them. Marking the occasion with some kind of memorial such as a burial can be very therapeutic. Help them focus on the good memories they had with their cat and the special place they hold in their hearts. Involving your child in how to memorialise a pet can be helpful.

Remembering your cat

There are many ways you can memorialise your cat. Here are a few options:

- post a memorial for your cat on the Cats Protection Memory Wall:
cats.org.uk/grief-memory-wall

- plant a tree or flowers in the garden or in a pot
- make a memory box containing items such as their toys and collar
- make a photobook or memory collage of pictures of your cat, or keep a framed photograph of them in a special corner of your home
- have a portrait made of your cat. Children may find it helpful to draw their cat or write stories about them
- write about your cat, or perhaps write a letter/blog as a way of saying goodbye
- have a plaque or stone made with your cat's name on it, perhaps with their dates of birth and death
- keep the ashes in an urn in a special place at home
- some vets will take a paw print for you after euthanasia either with ink or in a cast, or a clipping of fur
- treasure your memories, remember the good times and the joy your cat brought you

Getting another cat

The decision to get another cat is entirely personal. You may find you want another one almost immediately or that you need time to come to terms with your loss. If your cat has had an infectious illness, your vet may advise you to wait a period of time before getting another cat in case the infection remains in your home.

Cats, like humans, are all individuals. Although your relationship with a new cat can be just as rewarding, they will not be the same as your previous cat and this may take some time to get used to. Losing a beloved cat is incredibly hard, but when you're ready, giving a loving home to a cat in need can bring comfort during this difficult time.

Looking for cat advice?

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to cats.org.uk



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