



**HOSPICE AND
PALLIATIVE CARE**
for pets

DECISIONS SURROUNDING A PET'S END OF LIFE can be emotionally overwhelming for human caregivers, who often feel a strong need to provide care that reflects their love for the animal and the bond they share. Veterinarians play a critical role in guiding families through this difficult process by helping them assess their pet's quality of life and explaining the available options for thoughtful end-of-life care (EOLC).

Euthanasia has historically been the most common and widely accepted practice for ending the suffering of a companion animal. However, over the years, veterinary end-of-life care has expanded beyond euthanasia to include palliative and hospice care options as part of the EOLC process.

Understanding Veterinary Hospice and Palliative Care

Hospice and palliative care are specialized areas of veterinary medicine, modeled after human medicine, that allow for a natural death at home when pain and discomfort can be mitigated. They focus on comfort, tranquility, and quality of life while balancing the needs of the patient, caregiver and other family members.

Palliative care emphasizes symptom management and comfort over cure and can be offered at any stage of life and in conjunction with other treatments. It may include pain management, treatments for nausea or anxiety, supportive therapies, and periodic monitoring to adjust care as your pet's needs change. Hospice care, on the other hand, focuses specifically on the final stage of life. When a disease cannot be cured or when treatment would be overly stressful or costly, hospice care offers supportive options to help pets remain comfortable and enjoy meaningful time with their families.

The Veterinarian as Guide

Making end-of-life choices for a pet requires honest and open communication between the veterinarian and caregiver regarding the pet's symptoms, expected progression of the condition, and care preferences. These discussions should include specific goals for patient comfort and thoughts about euthanasia, as well as careful consideration about more practical things like administering medication, making home modifications as needed, and having the time available to care for the patient. Each situation is different, and a family's ability to provide proper care at home is not always a realistic goal, so veterinarians must help make these determinations. They should also educate caregivers about their pet's condition and how to recognize pain, cognitive decline, etc. Identifying symptoms early on will enable better care throughout the end-of-life journey.

A Family-Centered Care Approach

Regardless of whether a family and their pet are seeking hospice or palliative care, a family-centered care approach is critical to understanding and implementing a sensitive, effective, and realistic end-of-life care plan for each pet patient and the family going through the difficult process. Pets and their families are basically one unit when it comes to effective EOLC, and the process can benefit both in the following ways:

- prioritizes comfort care over treatment
- improves quality of life for pets in later life
- includes family in the decision-making process
- deepens the bond between family and pet
- supports enriched emotional healing during the grief process

Ultimately, as these practices develop and become broadly integrated into veterinary medicine, end-of-life care for pets, and the people who love them, will continue to improve and provide more deeply meaningful ways to say goodbye.

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