

When to let go



CATS PROTECTION
VETERINARY GUIDES



The average life expectancy of a cat is around 14 years. However, many cats live well beyond this. As a pet owner it is important that you are able to assess your cat's quality of life in order to prevent possible suffering as your cat gets older or if he becomes ill.

Monitoring your cat

You know your cat better than anyone, so you will soon notice any changes in his behaviour or health. You should monitor your cat's thirst and appetite, his body and coat condition, his behaviour and general demeanour and his toileting habits. Take your cat to the vet for a check-up if you become aware of any of the following:

- unusual lethargy or withdrawal
- unexplained weight loss
- lameness or unusual gait
- any swelling, growth or wound
- recurrent sneezing, coughing or laboured breathing
- difficulty or pain when urinating, or blood in urine or faeces
- incontinence or more frequent urination
- unusual discharge or bleeding from the eyes, nose or mouth
- vomiting or diarrhoea that lasts more than 24 hours
- self neglect or poor coat condition
- no interest in food or drink, increased drinking or a sudden ravenous appetite

- signs of pain when touched
- general discomfort or an inability to settle
- no desire to move

Sometimes you may just notice that your cat has changed his routine or is not quite right rather than any specific signs.

Your vet will examine your cat and recommend any further tests or treatments that may be needed. If the vet diagnoses an incurable disease, you will need to consider carefully the quality of your cat's life. Your vet will advise you whether drugs and/or treatment are available to extend your cat's life, but will only recommend this if your cat is able to expect a good quality of life.

The bond between owner and cat is very special so it is understandable that you will want to keep your cat alive, even if his quality of life begins to deteriorate. However, if there comes a time when your cat is in continual pain, discomfort or distress, the most loving and courageous way you can show him how much you care is to end his suffering.

Assessing quality of life

Illnesses are not the only form of suffering. You may also need to make an assessment of your cat's quality of life if he:

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

- is incontinent
- has an untreatable behavioural problem meaning he cannot lead a normal, healthy life
- has any condition that causes uncontrollable pain

To choose to have your pet euthanased is one of the most difficult decisions you will ever have to make as a pet owner. The guidance from your vet will be invaluable in making difficult choices but when there is no reasonable alternative, to allow your cat to die in peace and dignity is the kindest decision.

What is euthanasia?

Literally meaning 'good death', euthanasia is also referred to by vets as humane destruction. You may also hear of pets being 'put down' or 'put to sleep'.

How is euthanasia carried out?

Before euthanasia is carried out you will be asked to sign a consent form. Your vet may shave the fur from a patch of skin on one of your cat's front legs and will then insert a needle into a vein. The vet will then administer a fatal overdose of a drug which makes your cat lose consciousness. If your cat is fearful or aggressive he may be given a sedative before the injection to ensure that his final moments are stress free. In some very sick or old cats the veins may have collapsed and become difficult to locate so the injection may be given in another area of the body.

Your cat will be asleep in a very short time; his breathing and heartbeat will stop a few seconds later. As your cat loses consciousness he may take a deep breath, or gasp, and occasionally there may be a brief involuntary twitching or spasm of the muscles after death has occurred. This is quite normal, and should not be mistaken for 'signs of life'. As the body relaxes, your cat's bowels or bladder may empty. His eyes will not close.

Your vet will check for a pulse or eyelid reflex and may place your cat into a sleeping position. Do not be alarmed if your cat's lips are pulled back into a grimace. This is not a sign of pain, but is due to a relaxation of the muscles.

Discuss in advance with your vet whether you wish to be with your cat when he is put to sleep. It may be less stressful for your cat if he can hear a familiar voice, and knowing that your cat suffered no pain may comfort you. However, if you are frightened or anxious your cat may sense this and may become upset. You must choose what is right for you.

After euthanasia

Decide in advance whether you would prefer your cat to be buried or cremated.

Cremation

Your vet can arrange for your cat to be cremated, or you can take his body to the pet crematorium yourself. Your cat can be cremated with others and his ashes scattered in the garden of rest, or you can opt for individual cremation where his ashes can be returned to you.

You must 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 him in your garden, contact your vet who can arrange cremation.

Burial

Your cat can be buried in a pet cemetery. Most ceremonies can be accompanied by a short memorial service. If you would prefer to bury your cat in your own garden, you do not need permission from your Local Authority but you should make sure that the body is buried at least three feet below the surface. Place a heavy object on top until the ground settles to deter scavengers.

If you wish, you can arrange to donate your cat's body to a nearby veterinary school for medical research.

Coping with pet bereavement

Losing your beloved pet can be a very traumatic experience.

Don't be afraid to show your feelings in front of the vet; they will understand. You will need time to grieve and you may go through a mixture of emotions – sadness, loneliness and even anger. This is all quite normal and part of the process of coming to terms with your loss. You should not feel guilty or blame yourself for your cat's death – the decision for euthanasia is only ever reached as an act of kindness to avoid suffering. Treasure your memories, and remember the good times and the joy your cat brought you.

Losing a pet is often the first time that a child becomes aware of death. It is usually best to be honest with a child and explain the truth as clearly as you can. Be careful when using the term 'put to sleep' as a child may expect their pet to wake up again later.

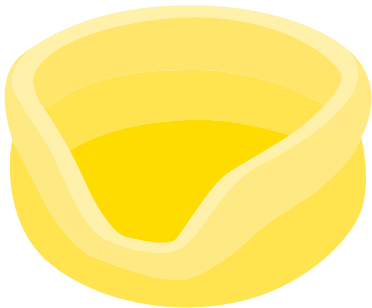
Children may want time to say goodbye to their pet and seeing the body may help them understand what has happened. Marking the occasion with some kind of memorial such as a burial can be very therapeutic.

It can be helpful to talk to someone who understands your feelings. Many GPs and religious ministers recognise the negative effects of suppressing grief and now offer pet bereavement counselling. Pet bereavement helplines are also available.

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 before getting another to reduce the risk of infection remaining in your home.

Try to remember that, cats, like humans, are individuals. Although your relationship with any new cat will be just as rewarding, he will not be the same as your previous cat and this may take some time to get used to.



This leaflet is one of a range provided by Cats Protection on issues surrounding cat care.

Cats Protection is the UK's leading feline welfare charity and helps more than 193,000 cats and kittens each year. We rely entirely on public generosity to finance this vital welfare work.

For more information on **adopting a cat**, **volunteering for us** or **making a donation**, visit **www.cats.org.uk**



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