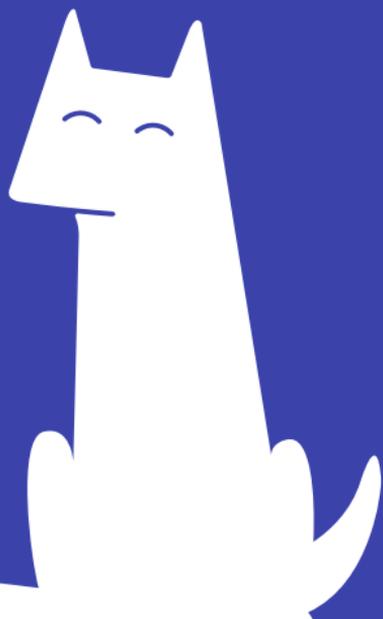


When to let go

Grief and loss



CATS PROTECTION
ESSENTIAL GUIDE 7



The average life expectancy of a cat is around 14 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.

Monitoring your cat

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

- unusual lethargy or withdrawal
- unexplained weight loss
- lameness, reduced or altered mobility
- any swelling, growth or wound
- recurrent sneezing, coughing or laboured breathing
- difficulty or pain when urinating
- blood in either the urine or faeces
- incontinence or more frequent urination
- unusual discharge or bleeding from the eyes, nose or mouth
- vomiting or diarrhoea that lasts for more than 24 hours
- self-neglect or poor coat condition
- reduced interest in food or drink, or increased drinking or a sudden ravenous appetite
- signs of pain when touched
- general discomfort or an inability to settle
- no desire to move
- reduced tolerance of people or other pets, reduced interest in play or other favoured activities, and general changes in behaviour, ie becoming more aggressive or withdrawn – these signs can be indicative of pain or an underlying health issue

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

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 carefully consider the quality of your cat's life. Your vet will advise you whether drugs or treatment are available to extend your cat's life, but will only recommend this if your pet could still have 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 their 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 them how much you care is to end their 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 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

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 hard 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?

The word euthanasia comes from the Greek meaning a 'good death'. You may also hear of pets being 'put down' or 'put to sleep'. The primary purpose of euthanasia is to relieve 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 less stressful for your cat if they can hear a familiar voice and have your presence to soothe them. However, it is easy to understand 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. 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, they may be given a sedative before the injection to ensure their 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 into another site.

Your cat will be asleep in a very short time and their breathing and heartbeat will stop a few seconds later. As your cat loses consciousness, they may take a deep breath, or gasp and occasionally there may be a brief involuntary twitching or spasm of 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. Their eyes will not close.

Your vet will check for a pulse or eyelid reflex and may place your cat into a sleeping position. Don't 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 muscles.

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 circumstances and your veterinary surgery.

Talk to your veterinary practice to find out what options are available to you. 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 the pet crematorium yourself.

Communal cremation and individual cremation is explained

below. 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 pet 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 crematory on its own or commonly on an individual tray with other pets on individual trays. If it is important to you that your cat is cremated individually then do ask about the process at the veterinary practice's preferred cremation service. 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 about the costs involved. Please also be aware that collecting your pet's ashes can be a difficult thing to do. Some people are not

able to collect their pet'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 it 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.

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.

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). Some cemeteries also have license to conduct human cremations and burials and this allows for you and your cat to be buried in close proximity and remain together after death.

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 was to you can help you process your grief and cope with painful emotions. You could talk to a friend, family member or one of Cats Protection's trained 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 below:



T: 0800 024 94 94

It is important to note that if your grief becomes complex or prolonged and you feel you are not coping, you might find that speaking to a counsellor will help. Talk to your GP about finding a suitable counsellor for you.

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' – this can be confusing, especially for younger children. They might think their pet 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. Marking the occasion with some kind of memorial such as a burial can be very therapeutic. Help them focus on the good memories they have with their cat and the special place they hold in their hearts. There are many ways to help children memorialise a pet. Involving your child in how to memorialise a deceased pet can be helpful.

Remember your pet

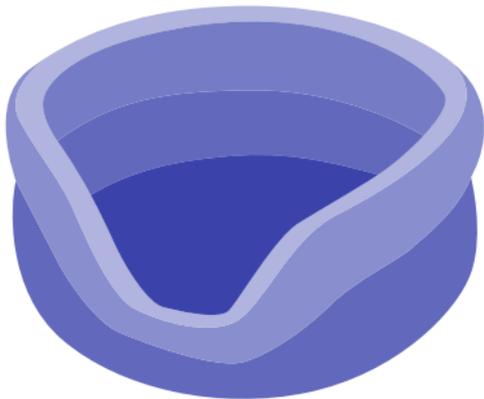
There are many ways you can memorialise your cat. Here are a few options:

- post a memorial for your pet on the internet, for example on Cats Protection's Memory Wall www.cats.org.uk/grief-memory-wall
- planting a tree or flowers in the garden or in a pot
- making a memory box containing toys, collar, etc. or a memory collage of pictures
- having a portrait made of the pet – children may find it helpful to draw their pet or write stories about them
- write about your cat, or perhaps write a letter/blog as a way of saying goodbye
- having a plaque or stone made with the pet's name on it – perhaps with their date of birth and death
- keep the ashes in an urn in a special place at home perhaps next to a photograph of your pet
- some vets will take a paw print for you after euthanasia – either with ink or in a cast
- 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 any new cat will be just as rewarding, they will not be the same as your previous cat and this may take some time to get used to.



For more information

Take a look at our website for more information on grief and loss at www.cats.org.uk/grief

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Info Line on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

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