

# QUALITY OF LIFE AND THE DECISION TO EUTHANIZE

The decision to pursue additional medical treatments or consider euthanasia for a sick or chronically ill pet is a hard decision to make for many pet owners. This handout has been designed to help you consider the quality of life of your pet and to help make you aware of some of the additional options that exist if it is not the right time for euthanasia. Answer each of the questions in each section with a yes or no.



## PAIN

Pain control is essential. Many animals do not complain in obvious, visible ways when they hurt. Many animals will hide their discomfort. Consider the following:

- My pet hurts.
- My pet limps. (If it didn't hurt, they wouldn't limp.)
- My pet pants frequently, even at rest.
- My pet's respirations are forced, exaggerated, or otherwise not normal.
- My pet licks repeatedly at one site on his/her body or at a site of a cancer/tumor.
- My pet guards or protects an area of his/her body and may snap if that area is approached or touched.
- My animal's posture is abnormal or different than normal.
- My pet shakes or trembles sometimes during rest.
- My pet is on pain medication and it doesn't work.

Possible interventions for yes answers: start pain medication, change pain medications, combinations of pain medications from different drug classes, surgical intervention, non-traditional medicine (acupuncture, etc.), treat the underlying disease/condition.

## APPETITE

Appetite is one of the most obvious signs of wellness. Most animals are normally vigorous eaters. Consider the following:

- My pet doesn't eat his/her normal food anymore.
- My pet picks at his/her food now but never used to do this.
- My pet walks over to his/her food and looks at it but won't eat or walks away from the food.
- My pet doesn't even want "good stuff" (treats, human foods, snacks) anymore.
- My pet acts nauseated or vomits.
- My pet is losing weight.

Possible interventions for yes answers: hand feeding, heating food, adding moisture by soaking food or using canned varieties, careful addition of human foods, syringe feeding, stomach tube placement, medications for appetite stimulation, medications for nausea.

## **HYDRATION**

Hydration status is equally as important as appetite. Without adequate water consumption, your pet can become dehydrated. Dehydration can contribute to weakness and not feeling well. Consider the following:

- My pet doesn't drink as much as he/she used to.
- My pet frequently has dry, sticky gums.
- My pet is vomiting or has diarrhea (fluid loss can also contribute to dehydration).

Possible interventions for yes answers: add moisture to the diet, subcutaneous fluid administration, medications to control vomiting or diarrhea.

## **HYGIENE**

Animals that don't feel well, especially cats, do not have the energy to maintain normal hair and skin. Consider the following:

- My cat doesn't groom herself any more.
- My pet's hair is matted, greasy, rough looking, dull, or foul smelling.
- My pet has stool pasted around his/her rectum or in his/her hair.
- My pet smells like urine or has skin irritation from urine.
- My pet has pressure sores/wounds that won't heal.

Possible interventions for yes answers: regular brushing and grooming, frequent bedding changes, adequate padding for areas where the pet spends a lot of time, appropriate wound care, treat the underlying disease/condition.

## **ACTIVITY/MOBILITY**

Changes in normal activity can be due to mobility problems, pain, illness, or aging (arthritis). Consider the following:

- My pet cannot get up without assistance.
- My pet had a hard time getting around and/or limps.
- My pet lays in one place all day long.
- My pet does not want to play ball, go for walks, or do the things he/she used to do.
- My pet falls frequently.

Possible interventions for yes answers: pain medication addition or adjustment, physical therapy.

## **HAPPINESS/MENTAL STATUS**

Another important area of consideration is the pet's mental status and happiness. Consider the following:

- My pet does not express joy and interest in life.
- My pet does not respond to the people that he/she used to respond to.
- My pet does not want to play with toys or do other things that he/she used to enjoy.
- My pet seems dull, not alert, or depressed.

## **GENERAL BEHAVIOR PATTERNS**

Changes in normal behavioral patterns are often a key indicator of how well and animal feels. Consider the following:

- My pet is hiding or sleeping in odd places.
- My pet doesn't greet me when I come home and he/she used to.
- My pet is overly clingy and is following me around and he/she never used to do this.
- My other pets are treating this pet differently—they are overly attentive or ignoring him/her completely.
- My pet doesn't care about what is going on around him/her.

## **OWNER PERCEPTIONS**

Many times an owner is aware that their pet is suffering but does not want to give up on their pet. Consider the following:

- I wouldn't want to live if I were in a similar situation.
- I would be painful if I were in a similar situation.
- I have made appointments for euthanasia for this pet cancelled or didn't show up.
- I am holding onto this pet for some sentimental reason. (ex. the pet belonged to a now deceased family member, the pet helped me through a hard time in my life, etc.)
- My pet is having more bad days than good days.

**Count the number of yes and no answers that you have marked.  Yes  No**

Unfortunately, there isn't a simple point system or scale that will tell you exactly what do for your pet. However, the more yes answers you have, the more likely it is that your pet has a poor quality of life. This list has been significantly expanded and altered from an article on quality of life. The original scale uses 50% as a cutoff. If this information is extrapolated, it would imply that more than 21 yes answers means your pet has a diminished quality of life. If this is the case, you have two options: 1. Make major changes to try to improve your pet's quality of life (like some of the things listed above) or 2. Euthanize your pet to relieve his/her suffering.

Please do not hesitate to contact us to further discuss this handout and your pet's specific situation.

