

When Is The Right Time To Say Goodbye?

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This is the first part of [Dr. Jeff Werber's](#) three-part series on end-of-life issues for pets. Dr. Werber is an Emmy Award-winning, nationally renowned veterinarian and former president of the Association of Veterinary Communicators. For more from Dr. Werber, find him on [Facebook](#) or on his website at www.drjeff.com.

Wow, sometimes this is a very tough call! When is the right time? How do we really know? Is he suffering? Uncomfortable? In pain? The truth is, we often don't really know—and, unfortunately, we can't ask him.

I am faced with this dilemma quite often, and, over the years, have tried to help hundreds of pet parents through this difficult time—doing my best to lend a viewpoint that is not as emotionally attached. The sad truth is, most of our pets do not simply pass in their sleep, so most often the decision to let them move on does rest on our shoulders!

The best I can do (and have done) is to provide some criteria to help a client sift through the emotional distress and hopefully come to some rational decision (and, even though more rational, still very difficult!).

I'll often ask pet parents to ask themselves the following questions or try to think about certain criteria: Does your pet seem happy? Does he still seem to get excited when you come home every day? Is he still eating, or even interested in food? Is he looking emaciated? Is he too weak to be able to get up and move around, especially to relieve himself? Does he have infected pressure sores from not being able to get up? Do you often look at him and actually feel sorry for him? If the answer is "yes" to many of these then, sadly, it might just be that time. I think we can all agree that we would NEVER want our loyal, faithful, four-legged friend to suffer! I've always felt that when nearing that inevitable time, you can't be faulted for making that decision a day early—but it could be awful to make it a day too late!

I've had pets all my life, and, of course, have had to make this decision before with my own. Let me share with you my experience with Woody, my second Labrador. Woody was an amazing black Lab, that we got when Thor, my first black Lab was getting a bit older and we wanted to get him a buddy. They were inseparable, and definitely brought some life back into Thor. Thor finally passed when Woody was about a year and a half of age, and seeing how much he missed Thor, we didn't wait too long before bringing Chester home, a stunning yellow Lab who happened to be Woody's half brother (they had the same dad). What a difference Chester made in Woody's life! Beautifully, they were growing old together, and when Woody was about 11 years of age, we noticed him clearly slowing down—not wanting to run around as much, getting up more slowly, not wanting to jump onto the bed as was so accustomed to doing. Though radiographs of his hips and lower back looked pretty good, we still chalked it up to his breed and age. As the months went by, his condition was progressing more rapidly than one would expect from arthritis or age alone, so we were really concerned. By this point, Woody, from his front end up, was Woody! Total Lab—loved to eat, still animated, very alert and loving, etc., but could barely move his hind end! He would do the "army crawl" to get to his food, and he could hardly sit up to relieve himself. We could see he was distressed. Knowing something was clearly wrong, but unable to see it on plain x-rays, we performed a myelogram (this was years ago before CT or MRI scans were readily available), and sure enough we sadly found our answer. Woody had a large tumor growing inside his spinal canal in the lower part of his neck. Well, this explained it all—his head and brain were still perfect, but the neurological signals were no longer making to his hind end. In essence, the back half of his body was no longer attached to the front. Our poor guy was miserable, and was no longer the Labrador he, and we, knew he once was. What was devastating us even more, was that his brain, and personality was still the Woody we knew and loved. Though one of the toughest decisions we ever had to make, we knew, given the diagnosis, Woody's prognosis, and seeing his frustration, what we had to do. I brought home the "injection," brought him outside where he spent countless hours playing ball and running around, placed him on his favorite bed, and said our last goodbye.

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I often tell my clients that they, as did I with Woody, will usually know when it's time. I hope my practice experiences, and Woody's story, will give you some guidelines that can help you.

Stay tuned for [Part II](#), in which we'll talk about the actual (and difficult) euthanasia process.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian – they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.