

Dr. Mike Paul, DVM

Mike has more than 35 years of experience in companion animal veterinary practice and is a valued member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team since 2013.

The special relationship that exists between pets and people is a strong bond that has undoubtedly existed since the ancient domestication of animals, but it has only relatively recently been studied and fully appreciated for its [emotional and physical benefits](#). Pets are an important part of our lives. They can influence who we are and add depth to our experiences. Increasingly, pets are not just animals who live with us but who also share our lives. They aren't simply part of our routine. They are part of our family.

While we may nurture and care for our pets as we might care for children, it is important to realize that their life spans are much shorter than ours. We should absolutely cherish the precious years that we have with our pets, but should also be aware that we will have to make decisions that impact how their lives will be lived and how and when they will end. The responsibility can be overwhelming, and the decisions can be difficult to make. As our pets age, become sickly or they're unable to live full lives do we intervene? If so, when do we intervene? How do we intervene? How far do we go to prolong life?

Hospice care for dogs and cats

Put simply, there are two options to be considered when faced with sick pets: We can do nothing or we can do something. Doing something involves many possibilities, but can include diagnosis, treatment, supportive care or even just a quality-of-life euthanasia decision. Doing nothing is ignoring the problem, doing nothing to identify or alleviate your pet's distress. In my mind, doing nothing and letting nature take its course is avoiding our responsibility and is akin to neglect. I'm not saying that most of us wouldn't wish for our pets what we would probably wish for ourselves: to live happily up until the last moment when we die quickly and peacefully in our sleep. Sadly, however, this is rarely the case. In addition the 'doing something' option is often a road full of twists and turns and intersections that we have to navigate on behalf of our four-legged friends.

End of life interventions can range from disease-specific, aggressive treatment to humane euthanasia. Supportive end of life hospice has become almost the norm for humans and at-home hospice care has become much more readily available as a means to transition. Like people, pets can often be kept more comfortable at home as they age. In order to make any truly informed end of life decisions, it is important that all of these options be discussed with your veterinarian. Together, you and your vet can consider what is in the best interest of your pet.

Hospice care is relatively new in pet care and some veterinarians are unfamiliar or uncomfortable providing hospice care. If your veterinarian does not provide end of life hospice, ask for a referral to a practice that does. There are a number of veterinarians who limit their practice to end of life care. You may have to seek one out.

Once you have reached the end of what you personally consider to be reasonable treatment, the next decision you might be faced with is euthanasia. The decision is very important, but is also highly subjective. My suggestion is to do your best to avoid second guessing your decision and to try to make the timing of your choice as objective as possible.

Determining quality of life for pets

I am a believer that, since the end of life is inevitable, the only thing we may be able to influence is the when and the how. In my opinion, at some point, even hospice for our pets ceases to be for their benefit and can turn into a way for us to postpone our own inevitable heartache. Animals live their lives in the present moment. As far as I know, they are free of guilt and regret, have no concept of the future, and do not fear death (or at least its aftermath). They do, however, suffer from pain, discomfort and decline. Since pets cannot communicate with us directly, it is our responsibility to interpret for them and to make that very difficult determination about quality of life.

There is a tool that I have used to help my clients, myself and ultimately, our pets live every quality day possible. Two questions you can ask and record so that pets pass not a day too soon but don't live an hour too long. A yes is indicated with a + on your calendar and a no is indicated by a -. The questions are, "Did I enjoy

interacting and being around my pet?” and “Did my pet enjoy his life today and could my pet be the essence of himself as a dog or a cat?” Simply surviving is not the goal. Having some actual enjoyment from being alive is. Having this evaluation will help you more objectively judge their experience and life.

When do you consider euthanasia?

That is always up to you and your decision should always be supported by your veterinarian. In the end you need to be comfortable that the decision you made has been carefully considered and made in your pet's best interest. Consulting the calendar will help you to more objectively evaluate when your pet is no longer experiencing a high quality life.

Personally, I feel that at some point we owe our pets the dignity and respect of a painless death, while not everyone might agree. I believe that euthanasia is a very difficult decision to reach and forces us to put the wellbeing of our pet first in spite of the pain it may bring us. It is the ultimate act of love and the last gift we can give our pets. [Click here to learn more about the process and particulars of euthanasia as well as in-home euthanasia.](#)

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.

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