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**How will I know when it’s time?**

Making the decision to euthanize your pet can be gut-wrenching. Many feel as if they are letting their pet down or cause their death, when in fact euthanasia can be a gift when used appropriately and timely, prevent further physical suffering for the pet, and emotional suffering of the family. Sometimes the decision is the hardest part of the experience and you may find yourself asking “How will I know when it’s time?”

As veterinarians, our job is to assist the family in the decision-making. There is not one perfect moment in time to make that ultimate choice. Rather, there is a subjective time period in which euthanasia is an appropriate decision to make. This period could be hours, days, weeks, or even months.

**Pain and Anxiety**

When discussing the decision to euthanize, we should be as concerned about anxiety in our pet as we are about pain. Frankly, anxiety is worse than pain in animals. Think about the last time your dog went to the veterinarian. How was his behavior? Was he nervous in the exam room? Did he give you that look that said, “this is terrible!”? Now think back to when he last hurt himself, perhaps scraping his paw or straining a muscle after playing too hard. Dogs rarely look as distraught when they are in pain as when they are anxious. It’s the same for animals that are dying. For example, many end-stage arthritis canine patients begin panting, pacing, whining, and or crying, but many of these symptoms are due to anxiety arising secondarily from the pain. This is akin to being stung by a bee but not seeing the bee itself; you may be more anxious at the lack of knowledge of the origin of the pain instead of strictly the pain alone. Anti-anxiety medications can sometimes help but for pets that are at this stage, the end is usually near.

**Waiting too long**

Owners experiencing the decline or terminal illness of a pet for the first time will generally wait until the very end to make that difficult decision. They are fearful of doing it too soon and giving up without a good fight. Some owners’ regret waiting too long. They reflect on the past days, weeks, or months, and feel guilty for putting their pet through those numerous trips to the vet or uncomfortable medical procedures that did not improve their pet’s quality of life. The next time they witness the decline of a pet, they are much more likely to make the decision at the beginning of the decline instead of the end.