

What is animal hospice? What is palliative care?

Both are approaches to care for your animal friend that can be adopted when the goal shifts from cure to comfort. Both involve an interdisciplinary team of providers who offer comprehensive care on the physical, emotional and spiritual levels and include veterinarians, animal and family services providers. The term “animal hospice” is not a place; it is a philosophy of care which became popularized in the 1970’s. Since the 1990’s the hospice model has been applied to also caring for our pets and thus hospice and palliative care for animals is growing across the US and the world.

Why animal hospice and palliative care for my beloved pet?

In the human hospice experience, families are well-supported and empowered to provide loving care to their loved one. As a result, they find enhanced coping along the journey and healing from their loss. Many pet parents want the same care for their furry, feathered and scaled family members as they’ve seen benefit their human loved ones, and so they turn to animal hospice. Pet parents also seek satisfaction in knowing they did all they could to support their animal companion, enhanced their bond with them during this time, and created cherished memories.

What kind of diseases or conditions would warrant hospice and/or palliative care?

The diseases and conditions that most frequently warrant hospice or palliative care for animals are:

- cancer
- organ failure [kidneys, liver and heart are common examples]
- osteoarthritis
- cognitive dysfunction, or dementia
- senior pets approaching the end of life
- Failure to Thrive
- any life-limiting condition that is contributing to an excessive burden of caregiving for a family, or treatments/interventions that are unacceptable to the pet

As a pet parent, what are my responsibilities in providing hospice for my animal friend?

Preparing to care for your aging, ill or dying pet is similar to caring for a child or aged adult. You would take time to learn about your loved one's condition and ways to ensure the highest degree of comfort possible. You would learn how to monitor your loved one's quality of life and then regularly communicate with the hospice team. You would make decisions with the guidance of the care team, and then take measures to act on your decisions once the appropriate time came. Along the journey, the well-being and feelings of the human family members would be validated and supported.

How do I know if hospice care is the right decision for me and my pet?

Many pet parents choose hospice care in order to have the time to say goodbye to their companions, to plan for their death, and to ensure that all the decisions about the pet's needs are guided by their personal view of the pet's needs. If you have the resources to support comfort care, the time and desire to care for your pet during the last days, weeks, sometimes months of their life, and a good support team in place, then hospice care may be the right choice for you and your pet.

Why do I feel so sad already, when my animal friend was just recently diagnosed? Few people seem to understand what I'm going through.

We know that grief associated with loss begins before the actual death occurs, and the name for this is "anticipatory grief". These emotions may sneak up on us and affect us in many aspects of our life. Grief is work! It is never easy, but it can be easier with the support of a team that values "care for the caregiver", a cornerstone of hospice philosophy. Yes, the ability to think clearly will directly affect how effective you can be in your care for your animal companion. Respite, or some time away from caregiving, can be important to your continued well-being.

We encourage you to reach out to like-minded individuals in your community and online who have experienced similar situations, and "get it". Look to your local animal shelters,

veterinary association, and pet funeral homes for pet loss support groups. Human hospice programs in your community offer grief and bereavement services to the public (interview them for their views on pet hospice first).

If you feel you would benefit from further or additional help, please see our Membership Page for therapists and counselors specializing in pet loss. You can also find more local resources in Directories from organizations like the Delta Society.

We have heard there are gentle alternative therapies we might pursue in order to keep our friend more comfortable. What about those?

Complementary therapies have proved excellent adjunctive support for animals approaching end of life. Holistic or complementary veterinarians may offer any of the following:

- Traditional Chinese Medicine
- Herbs – Western, Chinese, Ayurvedic
- Ayurvedic Medicine
- Homeopathy
- Acupuncture
- Chiropractic
- Nutritional Therapy and Supplementation
- Laser therapy

Are there other therapies that can contribute to well-being for my animal friend?

Similar to the holistic veterinary modalities above, the following are gentle techniques. Once learned, they can be affordable options to incorporate into your caregiving routine. In offering this special care to your pet, the emotional bond you have with him or her may be enhanced.

Consider talking to your veterinary team about:

- massage
- warm water therapy
- Healing Touch
- Tellington Touch™
- acupressure
- warm water therapy
- Reiki
- essential oils (aromatherapy)
- flower essences

I am concerned about my child's well being while he or she prepares to lose his best friend. Should he or she be a part of this process?

Children learn responsibility and love in caring for their family pet. Similarly, aging, illness, and death provide rich lessons about the cycle of life. Just as with their adult caretakers, children can be taught techniques to remain involved with their animal friend's care so they feel important and even inspired by this tender and memorable time. Depending upon your child's age and temperament, the advice/recommendation of your hospice team, and your careful preparation, consider allowing them to be present at the time of death. If you would like another opinion about how to assist in their coping and grief work, a child therapist can be considered.

I am overwhelmed with all the decisions and the information confronting me. How do I know when to reach out for help?

Hospice providers encourage caregivers to make a plan that begins with their values, goals and beliefs for their animal and for their family. A large role of your veterinary team is to provide you with education about your pet's disease course and what to expect, including indicators of the dying process. With the assistance of your care team,

you will be regularly re-assessing quality of life for you and your pet. You will be able to identify mileposts that signal the appropriate time to enact your plan. Just as you have always cared for and nurtured your pet, you will find that during this time your intuition and your intention to make good decisions on their behalf will seem natural in many respects.

How do I make bodycare preparations?

Inquiring about aftercare options in your community, and/or making aftercare arrangements ahead of time helps you prepare emotionally, and logistically, for when the time comes -when you won't want to be confronted with those decisions. Consider memorializing and paying tribute to your animal companion's life to promote emotional healing, as well as a richer understanding and validation of your family's loss. Pet funeral homes have full services to help you do so. You may consider planning a simple ceremony to pay tribute to your pet. You may look to the Web to find remembrance items, from special urns for cremains, to jewelry and other options. Post to a memorial website for a more public life tribute.

I would like to learn more about options for death with and without euthanasia. Are both available with hospice care for my animal friend?

Hospice philosophy recognizes that a "good death" may mean different things to different families, and is as individual an experience as birth. Under the care of a qualified veterinarian, both euthanasia and hospice-supported natural death are humane options for our animal companions. Communication with your veterinarian and the rest of the hospice team is important to giving your pet a good death and meeting your own expectations for what that will be like. If you are interested in hospice-supported natural death for your friend, it is essential that you seek out a veterinarian who is comfortable with this kind of dying process. Most important is the understanding that hospice philosophy is inclusive to all modes of dying for animals, both naturally and via euthanasia when needed.

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