Points on Pets: Putting an old dog to sleep

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: How will we know when it is the right time to put our old dog to sleep? She is nearly 14 years old. She has a lot of trouble getting around and recently has lost control of her bladder. However, she appears to be happy and we cannot tell that she is experiencing any pain. We all get depressed when we think or talk about our dog's eventual death, but we know that she cannot live with us forever. Can we be present when our veterinarian gives her the injection?

A: Deciding when to put a faithful pet to sleep is one of the hardest decisions pet owners have to make. Owners often feel a great amount of anxiety and some guilt while making this decision. However, most pet owners just sense when the time is right. When there is no hope of recovery or an inability to function, pets show it in their eyes. Euthanasia is the last gift we can give to a loving pet.

Most veterinarians allow the owners to be present while euthanasia is performed. If your veterinarian will not allow you to be present, you should ask for a referral to a veterinarian who will follow your wishes. It is important to make the last minutes of your dog's life as comfortable as possible. Your presence will make the dog feel more at ease.

The euthanasia procedure should not be painful or stressful for your dog. Most veterinarians simply administer an overdose of a potent anesthetic solution intravenously. This causes the dog to lose consciousness while the heart stops beating and allows the dog to die peacefully without a struggle. Sometimes the muscles of the bladder relax and the dog urinates and defecates involuntarily during the procedure. If your dog is excitable, your veterinarian might ask you to give her a tranquilizer hidden in a favorite treat a few hours before the procedure.

It is important that you decide how to handle the body before euthanasia is performed. Making decisions at the time can be difficult.

It is normal to be upset following the loss of a pet. You should allow yourself to go through the grieving process. Your veterinarian can help you locate a grief counselor if you want to speak to one.

Q: Would it be a mistake to accept a free purebred puppy with a cleft palate as a pet for our children? We plan to have the puppy spayed since we do not want puppies. We have never had a dog with this disorder in the past.

A: Most puppies with surgically corrected cleft palates make excellent pets. The surgery prevents the abnormal passage of food and fluids between cavities of the mouth and nose. Since cleft palate is a genetic

disease, you are doing the right thing in having her spayed. Many puppies with this defect die of pneumonia after getting food particles lodged in their lungs.

Before accepting the puppy and bonding with her, you should have your veterinarian conduct a thorough physical examination to be sure that there are no other congenital defects present. Your veterinarian can also advise you regarding the care of your new family member.

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