

Hospice Care and Euthanasia Decisions

Hospice care for terminally ill and aging cats has become more popular over the years. With the guidance of trained veterinarians, owners can administer medications and nurse their sick animals until they either die naturally, or until the guardian feels the quality of the cat's life is poor enough to consider euthanasia. Hospice and euthanasia decisions can be very difficult to make and caretakers should reach out to veterinarians and animal welfare groups if they need guidance. It is important to remember that grieving is normal for anyone caring for a cat, regardless of whether they are an owner or a colony caretaker.

Hospice Care

ACR feels that hospice care is an appropriate option for both terminally ill pets and feral cats. The American Association of Feline Practitioners supports hospice care and defines it as “a relationship-centered philosophy that all veterinarians can use in practice. The concept of hospice care is to provide an alternative to the premature euthanasia of a terminally ill cat—and not about heroic medical interventions.” People choose to use hospice care for a multitude of reasons including the diagnosis of a terminal illness, the inability of a cat to perform routine tasks as a result of a chronic illness, the failure of other medical options to help the cat, and other reasons.

Feral cat caretakers should take extra precautions if they choose hospice care. In their older years feral cats may come to trust their caretaker, and caretakers may be able to trap the cats and provide them care inside the home. Caretakers who consider this option should still take all necessary precautions when handling a feral cat. Despite the cat's illness, they are still feral. For some feral cats, in-home hospice may not be possible and caretakers may consider euthanasia. Caretakers may also let the cat die alone in peace if multiple attempts to trap the cat are unsuccessful. ACR feels this is a humane end of life decision.

When providing hospice care, make sure the cat's area is surrounded by her favorite things such as a comfy bed or a favorite toy. People who opt for hospice care should closely monitor the cat's behavior and take the cat to the vet for routine check-ups. Cats do not always show outward signs of suffering and may still perform activities such as eating and drinking. Signs of pain to look out for are excessive panting, gasping, shyness, hiding, stillness, and food pickiness.

Euthanasia

Caretakers may also consider euthanasia for a cat. Euthanasia may be the best option if your cat is suffering and their pain cannot be properly managed. Caretakers should discuss guidelines for euthanasia with their vet before bringing a feral cat into the clinic. Most feral cats are healthy and common illnesses and infections can be treated. ACR does not recommend euthanizing cats with FIV and has cared for many healthy FIV feral cats. However, for conditions that require long-term, in-house care and where treatment is not possible, it is more humane to euthanize the cat than it would be to release her back outside. Euthanasia should only be practiced when all other options have been exhausted.

End of Life

Remember, it is normal to struggle with end-of-life decisions and many people suffer from guilt, regret, or grief. These are not easy decisions to make. So always talk with your veterinarian, do your research, and know you are doing the best you can. If you are struggling with difficult feelings and having a hard time, please reach out to those around you for support.