

End of Life Care for Pets: Frequently Asked Questions

Contributors: Dr. Jocelyn Anne Mason, DVM &
Adrienne Tuling, BScN



They say that “Pain is a measure of happiness experienced.” This holds very true when speaking about the loss of a beloved pet companion.

Since the death of a pet can be one of the most difficult times in a pet owners life, we’ve compiled a list of question to ask Dr. Jocelyn Anne Mason, a veterinarian of 16 years, about the end-of-life issues of our companion pets and the options we have in caring for their remains. We hope this not only informs pet parents but also helps to destigmatize euthanasia and the processes that follow afterward.

Q1: If I choose cremation, what happens to my pet immediately after it is euthanized?

As a pet may release bodily fluids after passing, they are usually placed into a plastic cadaver bag for transportation to the aftercare provider. If this seems impersonal, you can ask your vet or pet’s aftercare provider about the option of a tastefully designed dedicated pet body bag, such as **EUTHABAG**, for your beloved companion.

for your beloved companion.

The next step depends on your choice of pet aftercare options. You may wish to plan these details ahead of time so you won’t be required to make decisions in the difficult moments after your pet passes. You can either work through your veterinary clinic or directly with the aftercare provider you have selected.

Regardless of whether euthanasia takes place in your home or a veterinary clinic, pets who will be cremated are generally frozen in freezers provided by corporate aftercare providers to both clinics and mobile veterinarians. Pick-up is generally scheduled twice weekly, though additional emergency pick-ups are available when freezers reach capacity before scheduled collection. Alternatively, veterinarians and pet parents may take pets directly to the aftercare provider during regular business hours. You may find a local independent pet aftercare provider that offers personalized services.

Aquamation operators also provide pet aftercare and generally have same-day pick-up services that are included within a radius of their location. There may be additional fees for after hour, weekend, or holiday pick-up, as well as for travel outside their service area. Since same day pick-up is available for both clinics and residences, freezing isn’t usually necessary. Alternatively, arrangements can be made for parents to take their pet directly to their aquamation aftercare provider.

Q2: What does the cost of euthanasia usually cover?

The cost of euthanasia typically covers the time the procedure takes, and medical materials used for the euthanasia such as catheters, disinfectants, and syringes. There will be a cost for the sedatives given to the pet and for the euthanasia medication itself. If the clinic uses a designated body bag for all euthanasia, this may also be included in the cost.

Q3: Is there a toxicity issue with a non-cremated euthanized pet?

Euthanized pet remains can be poisonous and possibly fatal to other pets who ingest them. These poisons may persist in their skeletal remains for decades. Cremation addresses this hazard. Moreover, euthanized pets that died of a contagious disease should always be cremated. Some jurisdictions prohibit burial altogether.

Q4: What happens if my pet dies at home. Do I contact the vet, or do I call a funeral service directly?

You can do either. Some aftercare provider/funeral services deal directly with pet owners, while others only deal with a veterinarian. It should be noted that going through a veterinarian may increase your cost, as the clinic may charge a cremation fee on top of the aftercare provider's own fee. In these cases, it may be best to deal directly with the aftercare provider as they specialize in dealing with end-of-life care. They can pick up your pet directly from your home.

Q5: What is cremation?

Cremation is the process of reducing the body to ash and bone particles through the application of direct flame and intense heat (around 800 – 1,000 degrees Celsius). The ashes and remaining bone fragments - collectively known as 'cremated remains' or 'cremains' - are further pulverized, resulting in a white/greyish coarse sand-like powder which is poured in a sealed plastic bag, cardboard box, or tin and safely returned to the family.

Q6: What is aquamation?

An alternative to flame-based cremation is **aquamation**, also referred to as bio-cremation or gentle water cremation, which uses a chemical process called alkaline hydrolysis. This process is most like the natural decomposition process that occurs after burial, but is accelerated with a solution of 95% water and 5% alkali heated to around 200°F that is gently circulated in the stainless steel vessel during the process. The alkali used during this process is potassium hydroxide, sodium hydroxide, or a combination of the two, both of which are ingredients commonly found in soap and skincare products. At the end of the process, all soft tissue is reduced to its basic building blocks, and just inorganic bone minerals remain (as well as implanted items if any, including microchips). The minerals are dried and processed into powder and returned to the family in an urn if they wish to receive them.

Q7: Can I pre-arrange my pet's aftercare?

The day we lose a pet ranks among the worst days in our lives. Pre-arranging the details of your pet's afterlife care eases the burden of what will be an emotional and stressful day. Exploring afterlife care options in advance allows you to make informed decisions about how best to honour your pet. Your wishes will be on file with your aftercare provider, including the transfer from your vet or your home, to carry out when the time comes. Consider details, including what you would like your pet transported in. A customizable and dignified option you may consider is a **EUTHABAG**, which can be purchased and personalized in advance.

Q8: What do I do if I want my pet buried?

If you want to bury your pet it is important that you check local bylaws, as it is illegal in some jurisdictions to bury a pet in urban or suburban areas. In the absence of specific local legislation, if you do decide to bury your pet, you should follow basic guidelines to protect human, pet, and environmental health.

- Place a layer of lime at the bottom of the hole and afterwards, on top of the body.
- Ensure when digging a hole, that the top of the body is covered by at least two feet of soil. If this depth is not attainable, it is important to cover the hole with a large rock or wire to prevent scavenging by wildlife.
- Buried pets must not come in contact with any surface bodies of water or groundwater including inland lakes, streams, rivers or open drains. Nor should they be buried in sandy soils, black land, rocky soil, flood land or around home foundations.

- Pet graves must not be located within 200 feet of any stream or groundwater and must be at least 500 feet from any well used to supply potable drinking water.
- Make sure to compress the earth and level the floor.
- Finally, if you ever sell your property, it is important to notify the future buyers of the presence of any pets that may be buried on the land.

Q9: How does my vet select an aftercare provider?

Veterinarians may select their aftercare provider for different reasons. Some will select based on the ethical practices of the service, while others will opt for the lowest cost. This is a good question to ask your veterinarian, should you decide to work through him or her. It is also recommended to do due diligence and research local aftercare providers. If you find one that meets your needs, you can either work directly with them, or request that your veterinarian use their service. There are also instances where veterinarians have their own aftercare provider on-site.

Q10: Does my vet need to complete the paperwork for the aftercare provider?

Usually your veterinarian will need to complete some paperwork or enter information via a web portal to be sent to the aftercare provider. This procedure depends on whether the owners go through their veterinarian or deal directly with the aftercare provider.

Q11: Can I take my pet directly to the aftercare provider?

Yes! In fact, it is recommended for the aftercare provider offering direct client services. We recommend you call in advance.

Q12: If I want to pick up my pet's body and bury or cremate it on my own, how will it be prepared?

Procedures vary by clinic. Your pet can be placed in a cardboard coffin, a professional purpose-built pet body bag like **EUTHABAG**, a plastic cadaver bag or it can be wrapped in towels or a blanket. It is important to note that, since many pets may leak bodily fluids afterwards, they should be placed in a leak-and-tear proof receptacle that is easy to handle to and from a vehicle.

Q13: Can I deal directly with the aftercare provider my vet uses?

Yes, in fact, this is recommended as they are the specialists in dealing with afterlife care. They have dedicated their lives to helping pet parents peacefully say goodbye to their beloved companions.



Q14: Do I pay my vet or the aftercare providers?

This depends on whether you decide to leave your pet with your veterinarian or deal directly with an aftercare provider. Ask these questions ahead of time so you know your available options.

Q15: What is my pet cremated in?

Most veterinary clinics and aftercare providers still use plastic cadaver bags to transport and cremate pets. Although this may be distressing, some clinics have opted to use more respectful and purpose-built bags, such as **EUTHABAG**, to allow the pet to depart with dignity. It is recommended to check this information with your clinic or aftercare service. Some, albeit very few aftercare providers, may remove the pet from the bag prior to cremation.

Q16: How are cremations usually priced?

Some aftercare providers price by weight, species or just by the service being offered. Inquiring ahead of time and taking care of billing prior to the euthanasia is recommended to avoid additional stress during those final moments.

Q17: Does pet insurance cover cremation?

Some pet insurers will cover the cost of cremation along with an urn. It is important to verify with each insurer.

Q18: Define private cremation versus individual/partitioned cremation versus communal cremation?

Different pet aftercare providers may define their cremation services differently. It is important to visit their website or establishment to understand the definition of their processes.

Private Cremation. The term private can be defined differently by each aftercare provider and is sometimes confused with individual. Typically, a private cremation indicates that the pet is cremated alone, with no other pets in the chamber. The ashes are then returned to the pet owner. However, the details are important to verify with your aftercare provider.

Individual Cremation. This term usually means more than one pet is placed in the cremation chamber and cremated at the same time with some form of separation between pets such as trays, refractory bricks, or space (thus the chance of ashes comingling is a possibility). The ashes will also be returned in this case. Again, this term can be interchangeable with private cremation. So, it is important to refer to the individual crematory's definition.

Communal Cremation. This means that several pets will be cremated simultaneously, with the cremated remains mixed together. The remains will either be buried or spread somewhere such as a cemetery, garden or another place unique to the aftercare provider. But, unfortunately, they may also be sent to a landfill. Requesting this information beforehand can help alleviate your concerns or fears.

Q19: Can you witness the cremation?

Yes, usually. Most aftercare providers offer what we call "Assisted Cremation" for owners who wish to accompany their companion to the end. In these cases, you, and anyone you wish to accompany you, will be brought to a viewing area to witness the process. This is becoming a more common practice, as many feel that witnessing is an act of closure that can advance the healing process. You may also request a visitation period prior to cremation. In this circumstance, your pet will be cleaned and placed for viewing, as with a human funeral.



Q20: Can cremated remains be divided?

Yes, they can. This option is frequently requested by families, siblings or pet co-owners.

Q21: Can toys and blankets or other items be cremated with my pet?

Occasionally, small items such as a plush toy, cards, drawings, notes or photos may be allowed to accompany your pet for the cremation. However, every aftercare provider has its own rules and it should be noted that the burning of such items can cause discoloration to the cremains.

Q22: Will the aftercare provider deliver my pet's remains to my house or do I have to go pick them up at my vet's clinic?

This depends on the arrangement between your veterinarian and the aftercare providers. Some aftercare providers will only deliver a pet's remains to the clinic (particularly if they have a working arrangement with the vet clinic). Others will deliver to your house via a courier service. Sometimes there is an additional charge to have home delivery.

Q23: How will I know I am receiving my pet's cremated remains?

Inquire about the traceability of your pet to ensure accuracy every step of the way while it is in the aftercare provider's care. Some aftercare providers attach a bar code or metal marker to the pet's remains from the time it is received and throughout the cremation process. This marker is generally included in the cremated remains.

Q24: Can I purchase my own urn, or do I have to buy one from the funeral home or aftercare provider?

You usually have the option to purchase an urn on your own, or through the aftercare provider's supplier. Again, an urn may already be included in the cremation fee. Some aftercare providers will also tell you that many household items can serve as urns.



Q25: Can I select my own urn?

Yes. However, an urn may already be included with the cremation fees. Most services offer a variety of options at an additional cost.

Q26: Are there other ways to memorialize my pet?

Yes! There are many ways to memorialize a pet these days. It is advisable to do your research prior to your pet's departure. It is not as stressful a time as after, and you can review your options and be prepared when the time comes. Some imaginative options include jewelry memorials, paw prints, clay paws and hair clippings as well as engraving options, such as military dog tags and glass-etched items. Trees can be planted in the name of the pet, and donations can be made to a shelter or university.

Q27: Do surviving pets grieve?

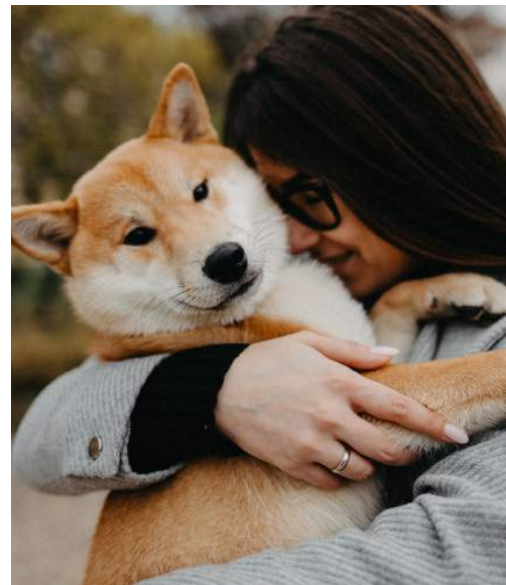
This is difficult to know for sure, but some pets do appear to go through behavioral changes that could reflect stress, anxiety, or a mourning period.

Q28: Are there any grief counsellors or support groups designed to help people deal with the loss of their beloved pet?

Yes! There are now many options available to grieving pet owners throughout North America and around the world.

- **Support Groups** are popping up in numerous communities and may even be offered by your local aftercare provider, veterinary clinic, or veterinary teaching hospital.
- **Online chat rooms** and hotlines are also becoming increasingly popular.
- **Certified Pet Loss Grief Counselors** have been trained to help and provide support and understanding during this difficult time.

Sometimes it just takes a sympathetic ear to help us move on with our mourning.



Dr. Jocelyn Anne Mason suffered from compassion fatigue early on in her career after euthanizing many cherished patients in practice. She has lectured at universities on the emotional toll euthanasia can take on veterinarians and pet owners alike and is dedicated to providing helpful tools to veterinary teams to try and prevent mental health issues that are becoming so prominent in this field.

Adrienne is a nurse-turned entrepreneur dedicated to supporting pets and pet parents through their pet aftercare journey. Adrienne completed her BScN in Toronto and had a nursing career spanning 25 years.

Adrienne is a lifelong pet lover who identified opportunities to improve the pet aftercare journey after the loss of her two senior pups in late 2019 and founded EVERMORE Compassionate Pet Aftercare in 2021.

We thank them for helping remove the mystery and stigma surrounding what happens to our beloved companions once they depart.

Disclaimer

healthcareforpets.com and its team of veterinarians, veterinary technicians and nurses do not endorse any products or services mentioned in any of responses, answers, resources and articles. All advice presented is not meant to replace a regular physical exam and consultation with your primary veterinarian. We always encourage you to seek medical advice from your regular veterinarian.