



Veterinary Wisdom®

for pet parents

8 Tips for Making Decisions for Your Pet

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It's the "exam-room sweat syndrome"—you realize your pet needs veterinary care, but you're not sure which course of treatment to choose. Surgery now or 'watch and wait' with possible surgery later? Diagnostic tests that may lead to a referral to veterinary specialists? Preventative diet change? Expensive chemotherapy?

As you ponder your options, the veterinary team awaits your decision. What if you make the wrong choice? Beads of nervous sweat gather on your forehead. Your heart pumps a bit faster. It's hard to concentrate, hard to breathe...you're seized by anxiety.

Experts who study how humans think say there are several ways to use your brain to make better choices. Here are 8 tips to consider when you must make a decision for your pet.

Remove the Pressure

It's hard to make a decision when people are staring at you, waiting for you to direct their next moves. It's also difficult to digest new information when you haven't had time to sort through it in your own mind. If your pet's situation is not an emergency, ask for some time to consider your options. Leave the exam room and even the veterinary clinic, if necessary. Schedule a time later that day or the next when you and your veterinarian will either meet again or speak over the telephone to confirm your decision.

Gather Other Points of View

If you have a strong need to reinforce your veterinarian's recommendations, you may want to seek a second opinion. Most vets will welcome the confirmation of their diagnosis and treatment plan and support your commitment to your pet. You will also want to talk with other family members or friends who know your pet and can help you think objectively about your options. Ask them what they would do in your situation, but, in the end, do what's right for you, not what would be right for someone else.

Do Your Homework

Investigate your pet's disease or condition, but be careful that the sources you use are trustworthy and credible. There are many websites, blogs, and articles on the internet claiming to offer veterinary medical information and advice. Yet, each pet and each illness or injury is unique in some way. What worked for another may not work for you and your pet. If you feel you need more in-depth information, ask your veterinarian to lend you resource material that will help you learn more about your pet's condition.

Ask More Questions

If you don't understand a 'why' or a 'how' of the recommended treatment, ask for clarification. And ask for your veterinarian to repeat it as many times as you need, without medical jargon.

Consider Your Finances

Today's veterinarians can provide nearly the same treatments for pets as human medicine can provide for people. Yet, just because you can do something for a pet doesn't mean you *should*. Your financial situation is important to consider when making treatment decisions for your pet. Remember, your ability to pay has nothing to do with the depth of love you may feel for your pet.

Be Realistic about Post-Treatment Care

Sometimes the post-treatment care for your pet may be very difficult or time-consuming for your family and/or lifestyle. Be sure you have a thorough understanding of your pet's home care requirements BEFORE you make a decision about treatment. Ask your veterinarian to explain his or her expectations regarding your pet's confinement, exercise requirements, and follow-up appointments, as well as the medications or medical procedures you will need to manage during your pet's post-treatment care.

Pay Attention to Your Emotions

Our conscious thoughts are only a small portion of what goes on in our brains. According to Jonah Lehrer, author of How We Decide, "at any given moment, the unconscious is taking in vast amounts of information that we're not even aware of and processing it all very quickly. Based on its conclusions, the brain generates emotions." Lehrer suggests we pay attention to these emotions as they are our own 'supercomputer' telling us what to do.

Challenge Your Memories and Personal Preferences

Your own 'likes' and 'dislikes' can limit your decision-making process. Beliefs like *expensive treatments are more likely to work* or *an older vet knows more about this condition than a younger one* aren't necessarily true. Separate your own values and beliefs from the reality of your pet's treatment options.

Recent research shows that memories may also be surprisingly inaccurate. Thus, they may not be the most reliable basis for a conclusion concerning your pet's care. For example, if you experience an extreme reaction to one or more of the treatment options for your pet, you may be remembering the details and emotions of a past experience as more negative than they truly were, now 'overcompensating' by leaning toward the opposite extreme.

So, if you feel the urge to reject an option, it may be due to a decision you made about it in your past. Yet, *this* pet and *this* pet's condition might be best served by the very treatment you are rejecting. And *this* veterinarian may conduct the procedure more skillfully and sensitively than the one you worked with in the past.

When all else fails, ask your pet what you should do. Remember that the bond you share is there in this situation, too.

Professional veterinary counselors can be helpful during treatment decision-making. For information about counseling or living and working with companion animals, call 1-888-271-8444 or visit www.veterinarywisdom.com

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