



What to Do When You Learn Your Pet Has Cancer

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The worry can wear you down and stress you out. Here are some coping strategies.

If you've recently heard, "your pet has cancer," the shock of the diagnosis has probably left you feeling numb and confused. You may also be experiencing an inability to concentrate or trouble sleeping at night. Other physical symptoms, like headaches or changes in your appetite, along with feelings of anger, helplessness, sadness, and guilt, may be exhausting you and making it difficult to process all of the information about your pet's disease.

Please be assured that all of these feelings – in any combination – are normal and common. They all add up to what experts call anticipatory grief. Since you will probably face several more tough decisions in the days and weeks ahead, some coping strategies that will help alleviate your stress and enable you to think more clearly may be helpful. These suggestions have been used by many pet parents who've faced similar ordeals with their beloved pets.



- **Write things down.** When you're given a lot of medical information and you have questions, it's hard to remember the details. Take notes during consultations with your veterinarian. If your veterinarian agrees, you might even tape record your conversations so details can be shared with family.

Keep a list of appointment reminders, as well as your concerns and schedule additional appointments with your veterinarian to discuss your questions and explore your pet's options, if needed. Ask about your veterinarian's availability and preferences for consulting further with you via text messaging, email or telephone.

- **Seek support.** Share your feelings and worries with people who understand the relationship you have with your pet. When you must make a decision about treatment, ask a trusted friend or family member for their opinion, but be sure to explore WHY they are giving you this particular advice.

Sometimes friends or family members recommend a plan of action because they want to protect you from experiencing further pain. While this is a loving behavior, you may need to ask them to set those feelings aside and focus on what they truly believe is best for your pet. Tell them what kind of advice you are seeking. →

(Cont.)

- **Don't be overly-protective of your children.** Parents often keep children out of discussions or decisions pertinent to a pet's treatment and/or euthanasia as a way to protect them from emotional pain. But, if your children have a loving, trusting relationship with their pet, they may prefer to have an opportunity to be involved with their pet's care.

School-aged children (and older) usually appreciate being included, or at least consulted about decisions regarding their pet's care. However, if your child seems to need some distance from the situation, you should never force him or her to be involved. Talk to your kids about your pet's diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis and see what level of involvement seems right for them.

- **Think about quality of life.** Individual animals have different personalities and levels of tolerance. You know your pet best, so you're the expert on what keeps him or her happy day-to-day. It may help to keep a journal where you write down your observations and thoughts about your pet's quality of life. As the reality of your impending loss overtakes you, it can be difficult to remember or to think clearly about what's truly best for your pet.

You may also want to consider the differences between pain and suffering for your pet. Pain is a physical sensation and can be controlled fairly well by medication. However, suffering is harder to evaluate and may arise from changes in behavior like a diminished ability to engage in daily routines or to interact with you. Remember, as you explore this difficult issue, that there are no right and wrong answers. Take your time, trust your instincts, and pay attention to the non-verbal cues and communication you pet sends you.

- **Take care of yourself.** Helping a beloved pet (and the rest of your family) through a serious illness is stressful and tiring. You may focus so much energy on your pet that you neglect yourself and, over time, your own health may suffer. Make a commitment to yourself to prevent the common phenomenon of 'caregiver burn-out.' Eat well, get enough sleep, and talk to supportive friends frequently. Please don't hesitate to ask others for help.
- **Ask for guidance.** Professional veterinary grief counselors who are trained and experienced in issues of cancer care support, treatment decision-making, end-of-life care, and pet loss are available in most states. Your local humane society or veterinary medical association (VMA) may also sponsor a pet loss support group. Ask your veterinarian for a list of local referrals and resources.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom[®] Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com