

## Caring for a terminally ill cat

Although treatment options are available for many types of cancer, sometimes treatment is not a good option. Decisions must be made to decide how best to care for your cat to ensure they have a good quality of life while they are still pain free and to plan their end of life care.

Firstly, what is a tumour? A tumour is an uncontrolled growth of cells in the body. These growths can be malignant (cancerous and likely to spread), or benign (not cancer and usually localised). Tumours can grow sufficiently large that they stop other organs from functioning properly. The progression of a tumour will depend on its type and location.

Once a tumour has been diagnosed it is best to discuss with your vet how to care for your cat. In some cases, the kindest thing may be to opt for euthanasia, particularly if the cat is in pain and suffering. In other cases, where the cat is still comfortable and relatively healthy, palliative or hospice style home care is an option. This usually involves using medication to relieve pain and discomfort, including non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) such as meloxicam, opioid pain relievers, steroids such as prednisolone and sometimes local anaesthetics. Palliative care can make your cat more comfortable, giving you an opportunity to spend some quality time with your cat and make the most of the time they have left. Owners often comment on how much of a difference a little pain relieving medicine makes in making their cat more comfortable and even improving appetite.

A cat very much relies on its sense of smell so warming food and offering special treats can help to keep a cat eating well on its own. Cats really do not like force feeding. It is also very important to ensure that your cat has plenty of opportunity to drink liquids so they do not become dehydrated. Multiple water bowls with fresh and/or flowing water, chicken stock or other tasty broths can encourage cats to take in enough liquids. For cats that need a little bit extra, you can learn how to give sterile fluids under the skin (sub-cutaneous or sub-cut fluids) at home. There are several guides available free of charge for pet owners on the Cat Professionals website ([http://www.vetprofessionals.com/catprofessional/free\\_downloads.html](http://www.vetprofessionals.com/catprofessional/free_downloads.html)).

Sadly, there will come a time when your cat is suffering and has lost their quality of life. Often there is a change in behaviour such as hiding or flinching when touched, becoming withdrawn, loss of appetite, reluctance to move or restlessness and difficulty in getting comfortable. Remember, purring is not a sign that your cat is free from pain, as even an injured or dying cat may purr. If your animal is no longer its "old self", then usually you will know that it is time. It is useful to note the number of good days and bad days in a week. A "good" day might be one where your cat spends some time curled up enjoying some sunshine coming in through the window, manages toileting in the litterbox, does a bit of grooming and eats and drinks without too much coaxing. A "bad" day might be one where you cannot tempt your cat to eat or drink much, there may have a toileting accident or straining to do any eliminations. When the bad days outweigh the good, you will know that it is time to start making decisions about end of life options. It is important that you feel comfortable having a discussion with your vet practice about end of life options, including the euthanasia procedure, care of the remains and how you wish to be involved.

Some pet owners prefer their animals to die naturally, while many will seek veterinary assistance. In many cases you can arrange for a veterinary surgeon to perform euthanasia in your home. As much as we would like our pets (and family) to die peacefully, this is not a common occurrence. Many owners report that their only regret was in waiting too long before ending their pet's suffering.

There is a great deal of information on the internet and in books about pet loss. Advice and support around pet loss are available from Blue Cross for Pets, The Ralph Site, HelpGuide.org and many other organisations, and there are links to these sites on our website. The Animal Cancer Trust website also hosts a Friends Remembered Gallery where you can upload a photo and tribute to your pet.

### Freda's story by Claire Everard

Freda is an older cat that I adopted from my local cat rescue knowing that she had been diagnosed with tumours, my aim being to make her final weeks or months as comfortable as possible before it is time for her to say her final goodbye. More than 5 months later she is still with us. She is comfy and responsive, but needs extra help with grooming duties. Before bringing her home I consulted my vet and the rescue about Freda's needs, and to plan for her end of life when the time comes. She has settled in well to her new home and is gradually getting to know my other cats, sometimes snuggling up with my older boy Jack. Whilst she loves her food most days, other days she needs encouraging with freshly cooked chicken or salmon. She was fairly quiet and withdrawn when we first adopted her, but now has explored our house and made it her home, she is responsive and has a healthy aversion to the Hoover! She has her quiet days and I am monitoring good days versus bad, and regularly monitor for signs of discomfort. As with all animals her quality of life is my primary concern; to help with Freda's care I have provided extra litter trays which I clean twice a day, she has lots of comfy beds and cushions to choose from, good quality cat food, tempting treats and lots of strokes/fuss. I know she won't be here for long, but know she will feel loved and happy for as long as she stays with me.



Edit: 30/03/16 Sadly Freda's condition deteriorated rapidly on March 8th, and she was put to sleep (euthanised) at my lovely vets. She was comfortable, wrapped in her blanket and I was able to hold her as she slipped peacefully, and quickly into her forever sleep.

Created by Claire Everard and Vicki Adams, 11/02/16 (Edited 01/03/16)