



## What to Do When You Learn Your Pet Has Cancer

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

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If you recently heard, “your pet has cancer,” it was probably an excruciating moment. The shock of the diagnosis has probably left you feeling numb, confused, and unable to process all the information about your pet’s disease. The tumult of emotions surrounding treatment decisions are most likely testing your resilience as you move through anger, helplessness, sadness, guilt, and even exhaustion. You may also have be experiencing an inability to concentrate at work and trouble sleeping at night, along with physical symptoms like headaches or a change in your appetite.

Please be assured that all of these feelings – in any combination – are **normal** and **common**.

You will probably face several more tough decisions in the days and weeks ahead so, in order to alleviate your stress and be able to think more clearly, you need some coping strategies. These suggestions have helped 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 a lot of 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 you can share details with other family members. 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 email and/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 want 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!

- **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.
- **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 simple 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 commit to prevent the common phenomenon of ‘caregiver burn-out’ by eating right, getting enough sleep, and talking to supportive friends frequently. Please don’t hesitate to ask for help.
- **Ask for guidance.** Professional counselors who are trained and experienced in issues of cancer care support and treatment decision-making, as well as pet loss, are available in most states. Your local humane society or veterinary medical association (VMA) may also sponsor a pet loss support group.