

When to Put Your Cat Down: Quality-of-Life Checklist

Checklist · 62 items · 10 sections

A gentle, honest checklist for cat owners weighing end-of-life decisions. Walks through the HHHHHMM Quality-of-Life Scale from Dr. Alice Villalobos (Hurt, Hunger, Hydration, Hygiene, Happiness, Mobility, More good days than bad), the red flag signs that the conversation should start, common terminal conditions, how to talk with your vet, in-home versus clinic euthanasia, aftercare, and grief support including the ASPCA Pet Loss Hotline. There is no wrong choice that prevents suffering. This is here to help you think clearly through one of the hardest decisions of pet ownership.

Open the editable, AI-powered version online:

<https://genechecklist.com/checklist/when-to-put-your-cat-down-checklist>

HONEST ASSESSMENT STARTING POINTS

- Pause before reading further and breathe. This is one of the hardest decisions a cat owner faces, and choosing to think it through is itself an act of love

HIGH

- Remind yourself that asking the question early is kinder than asking it late. Cats hide pain instinctively, and waiting until suffering is obvious often means weeks of silent struggle

HIGH

- Write down the last week of your cat's life in plain words. What did they do? Eat? Sleep where? Move how? Memory blurs under stress, and notes anchor an honest review

HIGH

A simple daily journal of good days and bad days is the most useful tool you can build right now.

- Acknowledge that there is no single right moment, only a window. Veterinarians often say 'a week too early is better than a day too late.' Both choices come from love

HIGH

HHHHHMM QUALITY-OF-LIFE SCALE

- Score Hurt from 0 to 10. Is pain well controlled? Is breathing easy and quiet, or labored and open-mouthed? Open-mouth breathing in cats is a medical emergency

HIGH

The HHHHHMM Scale was developed by Dr. Alice Villalobos. Each of the seven dimensions is scored 0 to 10. A total of 35 or higher generally suggests acceptable quality of life.

- Score Hunger from 0 to 10. Are they eating willingly, or only with hand-feeding and coaxing? Can they keep food down without vomiting?

HIGH

HIGH

- Score Hydration from 0 to 10. Are they drinking on their own, or fully dependent on subcutaneous fluids to stay hydrated?

HIGH

Pinch the skin between the shoulder blades. If it stays tented for more than a second or two, dehydration is present.

- Score Hygiene from 0 to 10. Can they groom themselves? Are they staying clean, or are they soiled with urine, feces, or matted fur they cannot manage?

HIGH

- Score Happiness from 0 to 10. Do they still show interest in people, in their favorite spot, in a toy, in a sunbeam, in being near you? Or have they withdrawn from everything they used to love?

HIGH

- Score Mobility from 0 to 10. Can they walk to the litter box, water, and food on their own? Can they jump even a small distance, or have they stopped trying?

HIGH

- Score More good days than bad from 0 to 10. Over the last two weeks, count how many days were comfortable and engaged versus how many were painful or withdrawn

HIGH

When bad days outnumber good days, or when the worst days are very bad, the scale tips toward letting go.

- Add the seven scores. A total of 35 or higher suggests acceptable quality of life. Below 35 is a serious signal to talk with your vet about next steps

HIGH

- Repeat the HHHHHMM score every 2 to 3 days during a decline, and keep a written log. A trend matters more than a single day

RED FLAG SIGNS THE CONVERSATION SHOULD START

- Note if your cat has refused food for 2 to 3 days despite tempting offerings like tuna, churu, baby food, or warmed wet food. Cats can develop fatal hepatic lipidosis from prolonged fasting

HIGH

- Note if your cat is hiding constantly, especially in unusual places like closets, under beds, or behind appliances. Cats hide when they feel vulnerable, frightened, or in pain

HIGH

- Note if your cat has stopped grooming for 1 to 2 weeks or longer. A scruffy, oily, or matted coat in a cat who used to be fastidious is a quiet but loud sign

HIGH

- Note chronic inappropriate elimination outside the litter box, not just occasional accidents. This often means pain, weakness, cognitive decline, or an inability to reach the box in time

HIGH

- Note vomiting or diarrhea lasting more than 48 hours, especially with weight loss or refusal to drink

HIGH

HIGH

- Note lethargy that does not improve with vet treatment, fluids, appetite stimulants, or pain medication

HIGH

- Note pain that is not controlled by prescribed medication. Cats in unrelieved pain may sit hunched, squint, breathe rapidly, hide, growl, or stop purring entirely

HIGH

- Treat any difficulty breathing, panting, or open-mouth breathing as an emergency. This is one of the clearest signs that suffering is present and immediate veterinary attention is needed

HIGH

- Note aggression toward you or other pets that is out of character. Pain often shows up as a short temper in cats who were previously gentle

- Note seizures, sudden disorientation, collapse, or repeated falls. These can signal advanced neurologic, cardiac, or metabolic disease

HIGH

COMMON END-OF-LIFE CONDITIONS

- Review the diagnosis: end-stage Chronic Kidney Disease, particularly IRIS stage 4, where appetite, hydration, and energy collapse despite fluids and medication

HIGH

CKD is one of the most common reasons elderly cats are euthanized. Decline is usually gradual until a final crash.

- Review the diagnosis: hyperthyroidism with complications such as cardiac disease, severe weight loss, or kidney damage unmasked by treatment

- Review the diagnosis: cancer, especially lymphoma, oral squamous cell carcinoma, or injection-site sarcoma. Ask about expected survival with and without treatment and what the final days typically look like

HIGH

- Review the diagnosis: diabetes mellitus with complications, such as recurrent ketoacidosis, severe neuropathy, or unmanageable blood sugar swings

- Review the diagnosis: Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP). Newer antivirals like GS-441524 have changed outcomes, so ask whether treatment is realistic before considering euthanasia

HIGH

- Review the diagnosis: heart disease, including hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and congestive heart failure. Watch for fast breathing at rest, fluid in the chest, or sudden hind-leg paralysis from a clot

HIGH

- Review the diagnosis: severe osteoarthritis or degenerative joint disease. If your cat can no longer walk to the litter box, jump onto the couch, or change positions comfortably, mobility scores have collapsed

TALKING TO YOUR VET

- Ask your vet the honest question: 'If this were your cat, what would you do?' Most vets will answer truthfully when asked directly, and their answer carries the weight of a thousand similar cases

HIGH

- Ask for a clear prognosis in time, not in vague phrases. 'Weeks to a few months' helps you plan. 'Not good' does not

HIGH

- Ask what the worst day of this disease typically looks like, so you can recognize the line you do not want your cat to cross

HIGH

- Ask about palliative and hospice care: pain medication, anti-nausea drugs, appetite stimulants like mirtazapine, subcutaneous fluids at home, and comfort-focused care plans

HIGH

The International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care (IAAHPC) maintains a directory of hospice-trained veterinarians.

- Get a second opinion if the diagnosis is recent, the cat is younger, or you feel rushed. A specialist consult by phone or telehealth can give peace of mind either way
- Ask your vet to walk you through the euthanasia procedure step by step, including the sedation, the final injection, what your cat will look like, and how long it takes. Knowing in advance lowers fear on the day

HIGH

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE DECIDING

- Weigh treatment cost against quality of remaining time, honestly. Choosing not to spend \$8,000 on a treatment with a 20 percent chance of three more months is not cruelty, and finances are a legitimate factor for the AVMA and most veterinary ethicists

- Talk with everyone in the household who shares this cat. Agreement matters less than honest conversation. Disagreement is normal and often dissolves once the medical facts are clear

HIGH

- Tell children in age-appropriate language. Use the real words: 'dying,' 'died,' 'euthanasia.' Avoid 'put to sleep' with young children, who may then fear bedtime. Let them say goodbye if they want to

HIGH

- Decide whether other pets in the home will be present or will be allowed to see the body afterward. Many vets believe a brief sniff helps surviving pets understand the absence

SAYING GOODBYE (FINAL DAYS)

- Choose your goodbye window. Many families plan one or two final days at home with favorite foods, sunny windowsills, quiet cuddles, and the people the cat loves most

HIGH

Offer foods you would normally never give: tuna, rotisserie chicken, plain yogurt, deli turkey. Calories matter less than comfort now.

- Take photographs together while your cat is still themselves. A simple phone photo on the couch will mean a great deal later
- Clip a small lock of fur and save it in an envelope or small bag. Many people are grateful later that they did
- Ask the vet or in-home service about a clay paw print or ink paw print as a keepsake. Most providers offer this without prompting, but it never hurts to confirm
- Watch for the day your cat tells you it is time. Many owners describe a quiet, faraway look, a refusal of a favorite food, or a stillness that is unlike rest. Trust what you see

HIGH

THE DAY OF

- Choose between in-home euthanasia and clinic euthanasia. In-home services such as Lap of Love or Pet Loss at Home come to you, typically cost \$200 to \$500, and let your cat stay in their favorite spot. Clinic euthanasia typically costs \$50 to \$200

HIGH

Ask the clinic whether they have a dedicated quiet room with a separate entrance, so you do not sit in a busy waiting area beforehand or after.

- Confirm the process with the provider in advance. A proper euthanasia uses heavy sedation first, so your cat is fully asleep and pain-free before the final injection. The peaceful phase typically takes only minutes

HIGH

- Decide whether you want to be present. Most owners feel better staying, but some find it too painful, and that is a valid choice. Your cat will be deeply sedated either way

HIGH

- Prepare a soft blanket or bed your cat already loves. Place it in a quiet spot with low light. Have a favorite treat nearby in case they want a last taste during sedation
- Know what to expect physically. After the final injection, the body may take a final breath, twitch, lose bladder or bowel control, and the eyes typically stay open. None of this is pain. It is the body releasing

HIGH

- Have someone drive you home if you are going to a clinic. Grief shock is real, and driving while sobbing is unsafe

HIGH

AFTERCARE AND MEMORIALIZATION

- Choose cremation type: private (your cat's ashes returned to you alone), communal (no ashes returned), or witnessed (you are present). Private cremation typically costs \$150 to \$350
- HIGH
- Consider aquamation, also called alkaline hydrolysis or water cremation, where available. It uses less energy than flame cremation and returns ashes
 - If considering home burial, check local laws first. Many cities and HOAs restrict pet burial, and a deep grave (at least 3 feet) and a location away from water sources are usually required
 - Plan a small memorial: a framed photo, a paw print, a planted tree or rosemary bush, a charm with a fur lock, or a candle lit on the anniversary. Ritual helps grief move
 - Pack away the food bowls, litter box, and toys only when you feel ready. Some people put them away the same day. Others leave them out for weeks. Both are normal

GRIEF AND WHAT COMES NEXT

- Accept that pet loss grief is real grief. Crying for days, losing appetite, feeling guilty, replaying the decision, sleeping badly: all of this is expected and not a sign of weakness
- HIGH
- Call the ASPCA Pet Loss Hotline at 1-877-474-3310 if you are struggling. It is free, confidential, and staffed by trained grief counselors who specialize in companion animal loss
- HIGH
- Many veterinary schools (Cornell, Tufts, WSU, UC Davis) also run free pet loss support lines. A web search for your state plus 'pet loss support line' will find them.*
- Watch your other pets for signs of grief: searching the house, calling out, eating less, sleeping more, becoming clingy. Keep their routines steady and give extra attention
 - Resist the urge to bring home another cat immediately. Most grief counselors suggest waiting until you can think about your previous cat with more love than pain, which is often weeks to months, not days
 - Be patient with the guilt question. Almost every owner asks 'Did I do it too soon? Too late?' The fact that you asked the question carefully, used a quality-of-life scale, and consulted your vet means you did the loving thing
- HIGH
- When you are ready, and only then, consider adopting again, in honor of the cat you lost rather than as a replacement. A senior cat or a hard-to-place shelter cat is often the deepest tribute