

# Hospice and Palliative Care Information for Fosters

## Hospice/Palliative Definitions

Austin Pets Alive! defines palliative care as the care of patients with a life-limiting illness that is not responsive to curative treatment or where curative treatment is not available or not applicable due to concurrent medical conditions, age, and other risk factors. Control of pain, and other symptoms, and frequent measuring of quality of life (appetite, activity, interaction with family members, pain assessment, hygiene) is paramount to optimal care. The goal of palliative care is achievement of the best quality of life for individual patients. Palliative treatment can be long term, for months or years and is also utilized for hospice patients.

Austin Pet Alive! supports hospice care as a means to provide support and care for patients in the last phases of incurable disease, or at the end of life. Hospice incorporates all of palliative care. A hospice case is expected to have a shortened lifespan and may only have a few weeks or months to live.

In both of these categories, heroic measures such as extensive hospitalization, advanced imaging, specialist referrals, and invasive surgery would not be pursued. Minimal laboratory or other diagnostic tests may be warranted. Pain medication and other available supplements, prescription diets, or other medications to treat chronic conditions would be utilized. These pets can be adopted as hospice or palliative patients with full disclosure of the medical condition and expected prognosis. The focus for these patients is on quality of life.

## Specific Medical Conditions

**Osteoarthritis**, this inflammatory condition is the result of long-term stresses on a joint, either resulting from an old injury or from natural development of a poorly conformed joint. While surgery may be able to help in some situations, most of the time the degeneration of the joint cannot be reversed and treatment focuses on preventing progression of damage. As a foster, you will be responsible for monitoring for signs of pain, administering medications and joint supplements, and alerting us when the animal has decreased mobility.

**Chronic kidney disease** refers to the situation where the kidneys have not been able to perform at least one of their many tasks adequately for some time (months to years). This is very common in cats, but also occurs in dogs. As a foster, you will be responsible for making sure the animal eats and drinks enough, monitoring urine output, and possibly administering subcutaneous fluids/other medications as well as bringing the animal in for occasional blood work.

**Chronic or "degenerative" valve disease** accounts for about 75% of cardiovascular disease in dogs. As the name suggests, this is a condition where the valves of the heart begin to degenerate. This disease can range from asymptomatic to severe. If the animal has been in heart failure before, we will ask fosters to medicate the animal and alert us immediately of any change in energy or breathing difficulty. If the animal has severe disease but does not require medication yet, we will just ask that you monitor the dog for an increase in difficulty or frequency of breathing.

**Feline Leukemia** is a retroviral infection that causes immune suppression and makes cats more likely to develop various infections and lymphoma. The virus can be passed 3 different ways: the saliva of infected cats contaminating the eye, mouth, and nose membranes of non-infected cats via licking, by passing infected blood to non-infected cats, and from mother to fetuses (developing

kittens) during pregnancy. Approximately 85% of cats with FeLV infection die within 3 years of the diagnosis. As a foster we ask that you immediately alert us when the cat appears sick for any reason (quits eating, has less energy, develops respiratory signs, appears pale, or anything else out of the ordinary). Fosters should ideally have no other cats (having dogs is fine) or be able to totally separate owned cats from the foster. Depending on the cat's age, they may need to be re-tested periodically until they are determined to be infected for life.

**Metastatic cancer**, depending on the type of cancer, the animal may have only a few weeks or months to live. The most important thing for these cats/dogs is to make sure they have a good quality of life. We ask fosters to alert us when the animal seems to be in pain, stops eating as much, has less energy, or anything else suggesting the animal is not comfortable. They may also need medications.

### **Hyperthyroidism**

**Cats:** The most common hormone imbalance in cats. Signs include: weight loss despite excellent appetite, increased hunger, drinking, and urination. They are often restless and especially demanding of attention. We ask fosters of these cats to monitor their clinical signs at home, give medications, alert us when anything changes, and bring the cat in for bloodwork periodically.

**Dogs:** A condition, commonly in dogs, where the body does not make enough thyroid hormone. This results in obesity, decreased activity, and skin problems. We will probably ask you to give an oral medication, bring the pet in for occasional blood work, and monitor food intake and weight loss.

**Diabetes** is a disorder where the body doesn't have enough insulin, a substance required to process glucose and provide energy to the body. Good glucose control and proper diet can resolve the diabetes in some lucky cats but virtually never in diabetic dogs. Signs of diabetes that we will ask for you to monitor include increased urination and drinking, excessive eating, and weight loss. We may need you to administer insulin which consists of a once or twice daily injection under the skin that we can easily teach you how to give. We will need you to bring the animal in and drop him/her off for blood glucose curves.

**Collapsing trachea:** These dogs have an abnormal windpipe, causing them to have a "goose honk cough" especially when excited. The most common treatment is medical management, usually including a cough suppressant, short course steroids, inhalants, and possibly antibiotics. We will probably ask you to give medications and communicate with us frequently on severity of symptoms. Animals with collapsing trachea that are obese will need to lose weight since fat accumulation exacerbates collapsing trachea.

**Keratoconjunctivitis sicca** or "dry eye" is a common disorder of dogs where the tear glands do not make sufficient amounts of tear drops. We will ask you to apply ophthalmic medications and occasionally oral medications, and come in occasionally so we can measure tear production. Dogs often respond well to medical management, however, some severe cases necessitate enucleation (removal of the eyeball) to give the patient more comfort.

**Severe dental disease:** These dogs or cats may have various issues going on with their teeth, and are put into foster mainly because we want to make sure they are comfortable, eating well, and not losing weight. We may need to give them a dental at APA!, or send them in for an appointment at a clinic better suited for dental surgery. We may ask you to administer medications such as antibiotics or pain medication, and alert us if the patient loses weight, stops eating or appears uncomfortable.

**Feline gingivostomatitis** (FGS) is a severe oral disease that affects some cats where the body becomes allergic to plaque around the teeth. Often, the disease is related to an underlying chronic viral disease. The condition can be very painful, even causing cats to drool and lose interest in food. After examination to make sure the cat doesn't have other problems, we will schedule a dental to decrease the amount of plaque. If medications and a dental do not help, we will likely schedule full mouth extractions through another clinic. Even with these therapies, some cats continue to have mouth pain. As a foster, we need you to monitor the cat's drooling, interest in food, and pain, and to give medications.