



**Veterinary Cancer  
Specialists  
of New England**

[www.vcsnewengland.com](http://www.vcsnewengland.com)  
(508) 276-0836

## Quality of Life

At VCS New England, your cat or dog's quality of life is the biggest factor we consider as we discuss treatment options. We will work with you to make sure we are doing the absolute best thing for your pet.

### Quality vs. quantity

Our goal in treating your pet's cancer is to cure the disease while maintaining a good quality of life, however, in many instances a cure is not possible. In these cases, our focus is to achieve a good quality of life for as long as possible. We believe it's important to keep these two factors—quality and quantity—in balance, and it's a team effort. We will provide perspective by being both objective and well-informed about your pet's cancer and the potential effects, and because you know your pet the best, you can bring perspective about what a good quality of life is for your cat or dog.

### Assessing quality of life

Since we cannot ask our pets how they feel, we rely on their behavior to assess their quality of life. For some people, a good quality of life for their pet means he or she will chase a ball, play with a

ribbon, or greet them at the door; while for others, it's making sure their pet is eating, sleeping, and relaxing with minimal pain. In many ways, this is a personal, subjective assessment and you play a big role in it.

One thing that makes this assessment difficult is being so close to your pet that you don't see the gradual decline on a daily basis. A decline may be more apparent to people who see your cat or dog less frequently, like on a weekly or monthly basis, so at the start of your pet's cancer treatment, we encourage you to establish and document your own personal minimum standards with respect to quality of life for your pet. Minimum standards may include your pet's lack of interest in eating or going on walks or, perhaps it's an inability to get comfortable or trouble breathing.

Veterinary oncologists have developed measurements to assess quality of life. The Animal Medical Center in New York City developed a “Performance Scale” that allows both the pet’s family and the veterinarian to assess overall quality of life by considering five factors that affect an animal’s ability to carry on its normal activities. These factors are:

- alertness/mental status;
- appetite;
- weight/body condition;
- activity/exercise tolerance; and,
- elimination behaviors.

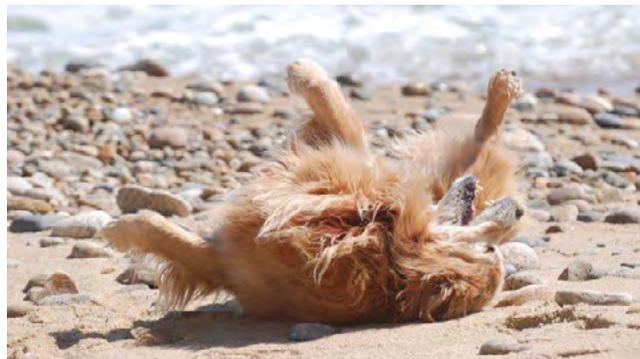
This assessment is a good indicator as to how your pet feels overall, while also providing useful medical information. In general, animals that score high (i.e., have close to normal behaviors) tend to tolerate treatments well and do better overall than animals that score lower on the scale.

## **Balancing treatment and side effects**

Curing cancer means killing cancer cells, but in doing so, normal tissues can also be affected, which leads to side effects that can affect the patient’s quality of life. We often find that the extent of side effects that families consider tolerable for their pet depends on the goal and expected outcome of treatment. If the hope is for a cure or control of the cancer (which in veterinary medicine usually means survival of one year or longer), then you may be willing to tolerate treatment side

effects with a higher risk, severity, and duration.

Most side effects are self-limiting and resolve within a short period of time. And, if necessary, we can use medication to combat many side effects and maintain your pet’s quality of life. Less than 10% of canine/feline patients undergoing cancer treatment need to be hospitalized for side effects. Each person has their own opinion as to what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable risks and side effects; therefore, it is important to thoroughly discuss these concerns with us so together we can work toward a common goal for your pet.



## **Palliative treatment**

When long-term control of the cancer or a cure is unlikely, or when a family decides against aggressive therapy, we consider palliative therapy. The goal of palliative therapy is to improve and/or maintain your cat or dog’s quality of life with minimal negative impact. While palliative therapy is not meant to increase survival time, this may be an outcome if your pet feels better as a result of treatment.

## **End of life**

Unfortunately, there often comes a point in therapy when we have exhausted all reasonable treatment options, including pain management, and your pet's quality of life has deteriorated to an unacceptable level. At this point, even with possible treatments still available, it may not be best for the patient. When this stage is reached most people consider humane euthanasia to prevent suffering as the cancer progresses.

For families not interested in euthanasia, we will try to provide supportive medical care and may also refer you to a veterinary hospice specialist. We believe euthanasia is a humane, painless process with minimal undue stress on your beloved pet. In fact, we believe it is the last act of kindness for our beloved companions.