

SPAYING & NEUTERING

Why is spaying and neutering important?

Spaying is the process of removing the uterus and ovaries of a female. Neutering involves removing the testicles of a male. Both procedures are routinely performed to ensure animals are not able to reproduce, and eliminate the production of sex hormones. Many reasons exist to support routine spaying and neutering of pets:

Overpopulation

It is estimated that 6-8 million homeless animals enter shelters every year in the United States. Half of these are euthanized. An estimated 1 out of 4 dogs seen in shelters are purebred. The figure below illustrates how quickly unneutered animals can reproduce and overpopulate. Even a single litter may be too much—the average litter size of a Labrador is 8 pups, but can be as high as 16. Finding homes for all of these animals can be difficult to impossible, and many end up abandoned, in shelters, or euthanized.

Decreases Risk of Cancer

Spaying and neutering, especially when young, decreases the risk of prostate, perianal, and breast cancer. The risk of testicular, uterine, and ovarian cancer is virtually eliminated. If not spayed, 1 in 4 female dogs and roughly 1 in 5 female cats will develop breast cancer. When spayed before their 1st heat cycle (may occur as early as 6 months of age), the risk of breast cancer is reduced by 99.8%. When spayed after the 1st heat cycle, but before the 2nd, the risk is reduced by 69%. Spaying after the 2nd heat has not been shown to reduce risk. Cats spayed before 6 months of age have a 91% reduction in risk, with a 86% reduction if spayed between 6 and 12 months of age.

Decreases Risk of Other Diseases

Spaying and neutering dramatically decreases the risk of prostatic and uterine infections. Uterine infection, or pyometra, is a potentially life-threatening condition that often requires emergency surgery. It is commonly seen in older intact females and dogs that have heat cycles more often than every 6 months.

Decreases Unacceptable Behaviors

Spaying and neutering may decrease aggression toward other animals. Males neutered before puberty (on average, 6-9 months of age) are less likely to develop mounting or urinary marking behaviors in the house. This is especially important in male cats. Escape attempts and roaming may also be reduced.

Affordable

Comparatively, spays and neuters are among the least costly surgical procedures performed by veterinarians. The importance of spaying and neutering to individual animals and the local animal population is such that most veterinarians perform the surgery at a reduced rate. Assistance programs may also be available to help with the cost of surgery.

When should an animal be spayed or neutered?

Cats and small breed dogs should ideally be spayed or neutered prior to puberty but after completing most of their initial vaccine series—generally between 4-6 months of age. Large breed puppies may benefit from waiting until they are more mature. Recent studies have shown sex hormones have a positive influence on bone growth and waiting until large breed puppies are older to spay/neuter can reduce the risk of hip dysplasia. It is generally recommended to spay large breed females at 10-11 months of age (before their second heat so the breast cancer risk is still reduced by 70%) and to neuter large breed males at 18 months of age when they are skeletally mature. Older animals should be spayed/neutered as soon as possible to reduce the risk of health problems and unwanted pregnancy. Breeding animals should be spayed/neutered when their last litter is weaned. Appropriate vaccinations and preoperative blood work should be performed prior to surgery.

Myths

My dog will be less protective.

It is instinctive for dogs to protect the home and family. Their personality is formed more by genetics and environment than sex hormones. However, inappropriate aggression, especially toward other animals, may be reduced by spaying/neutering.

It is better for a female to have a litter first.

As previously discussed, it has been proven that spaying prior to puberty (the first heat cycle) dramatically reduces the risk of breast cancer. The cost associated with having a litter may be high, especially if there are complications or a C-section must be performed. Litter sizes may be large and finding homes for all of the puppies or kittens may be difficult.

My dog or cat will get fat.

The hormonal changes associated with spaying or neutering do reduce the animal's metabolic rate by about 30%. The solution is to feed them 30% less food than they ate prior to surgery and provide plenty of exercise. Even intact animals may become obese if they are fed too much and do not get enough exercise.

My male pet will feel less manly.

Pets don't have any concept of sexual identity or ego. Neutering will not change a pet's basic personality. He doesn't suffer any kind of emotional reaction or identity crisis when neutered.

My pet is so special, I want a puppy/kitten just like him or her.

Your pet's puppies or kittens have an unlikely chance of being a carbon copy of your pet. Even professional breeders cannot make this guarantee. There are shelter pets waiting for homes who are just as cute, smart, sweet, and loving as your own.

My animal should not be fixed because it is purebred.

As discussed, many shelter animals are purebred. There may not be a demand for certain breeds in your area. Only animals who are a good representation of their breed (see AKC guidelines) and have no history of hereditary medical problems should be bred. If you are not going to breed your pet, then it should be spayed/neutered.

What are the risks?

Anesthetic and Surgical Complications

There is always a risk associated with any anesthetic or surgical procedure. Complications associated with routine spays and neuters in healthy animals are very uncommon. Depending on your pet's age and physical status, preoperative screening such as blood work may be recommended to help evaluate your pet's health and risk of complications.

Urinary Incontinence

A small percentage of female dogs spayed at any age may develop urinary incontinence (involuntary leaking of urine). This results from a loosening of the urethral sphincter muscle in response to low levels of sex hormones. Several medications are available to treat this condition.

Eunuchoid Syndrome

5% of "aggressive working dogs" (police dogs, sheep dogs) may "lose their edge" after being spayed.

Overall, the risks associated with spaying & neutering are minimal and, with few exceptions, are far outweighed by the potential benefits.