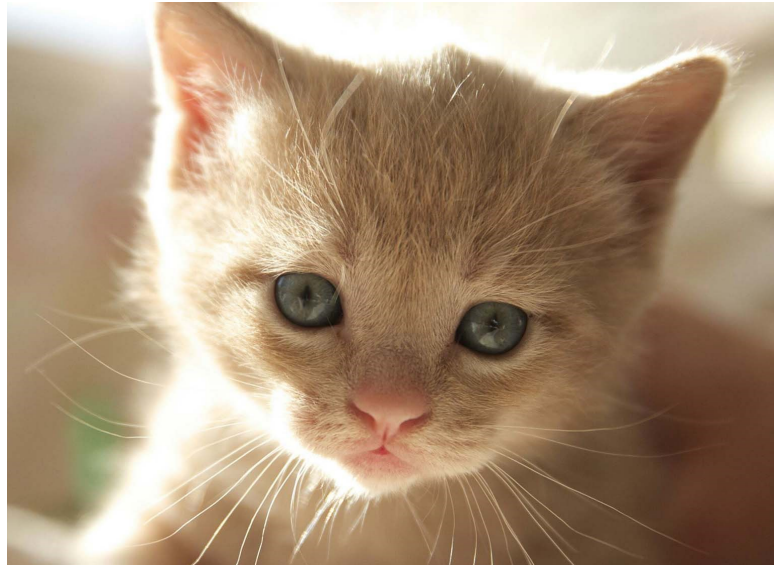


# Early Age or Pediatric Spay/Neuter

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Traditionally, veterinarians sterilized kittens around six months of age. However, studies and statistics show that early age or pediatric (between eight and 16 weeks of age) spay/neuter surgery is safe and provides greater short- and long-term health benefits than surgery done later in development (Kustritz, 2022; Howe, 2015). Nowadays, early age spay/neuter is more commonly practiced than later procedures among veterinarians, yet some misconceptions surrounding this topic still remain.



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*A beautiful spring kitten.*

Some individuals still think it is healthier to allow a female cat to give birth to one litter of kittens prior to being spayed, and that a female cat should not be spayed until after her first oestrus period. However, motherhood provides no extra health benefit to a female cat. In fact, statistics show that quite the opposite is true. According to the 2013 “State of Pet Health Report” released by Banfield Pet Hospital, spaying female cats eliminates the risk of pyometra, a life-threatening infection of the uterus, and when female cats are spayed *before* their first oestrus cycle, the risk of them developing cervical, uterine, and mammary cancer is greatly reduced (“State of Pet Health Report,” 2013). Similarly for male cats, neutering eliminates the risk of testicular cancer (“State of Pet Health Report,” 2013).

Some people also mistakenly believe that spaying or neutering a cat “too early” in development can result in behavioral problems, although once again the opposite has been found to be true. Spaying or neutering

a kitten early in age can actually *curb* certain behavioral issues such as territorial spraying/urinating and aggression.

Early age spay/neuter has been endorsed by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) because it provides a solution to the overall need to stem the overpopulation of companion animals (Nolen, 2013). Further support for this procedure comes from the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights (AVAR), the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Spay USA, and the American Humane Association (AHA). There are also several statistics that create incentives for early age spay/neuter for kittens:

- Research shows that 40 to 50 percent of people adopting cats from rescue groups or shelters do not abide by the contracts that were signed at the time of the adop-

tions, including specific sterilization requirements (Hoskins, 2005). While the American Pet Products Association reports show that 87 to 91 percent of companion cats have been spayed, 20 percent of those cats had produced at least one litter prior to being spayed (Christiansen, 1998).

- Cat guardians harbor serious misconceptions about the reproductive habits of cats. 84 percent of 715 people surveyed believe cats cannot get pregnant before the age of six months (Christiansen, 1998).
- Euthanasia of healthy cats in shelters is the leading cause of death in cats. That is, more cats are deliberately killed for lack of homes and lack of space than those who die from feline diseases (Levy and Crawford, 2004).

Over the past 11 years, the number of cats being euthanized in shelters has decreased by a remarkable 82 percent (PetPoint Shelter Data, 2021). Despite this improvement, it is unacceptable that hundreds of thousands are still being killed (PetPoint Shelter Data, 2021).

Overpopulation, however, is not a problem without a solution. Two important tools that reduce the number of unwanted animals without resorting to killing are early age spay/neuter and pre-adoption sterilization (spaying/neutering all animals before they are adopted into new homes). Both practices help not only put an end to the killing of perfectly healthy animals in our nation's shelters, but will also go a long way in stopping more stray and outdoor cats from joining feral colonies.

In addition to helping the greater community of cats in our country, early age spay/neuter helps each individual kitten. The procedure is safe, and kittens sterilized before they are twelve weeks old have even fewer complications from surgery than in



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*Keep kittens on a warming pad after spay/neuter surgery.*

procedures done on older cats (“Juvenile Spay/Neuter,” 2022).

Precautions can be taken by veterinarians during surgery and by caretakers during recovery to ensure kittens' safety. After surgery, to prevent low blood sugar or hypoglycemia, kittens under four months of age should only fast for three to four hours prior to surgery, and they should also be encouraged to eat a small meal within one hour of recovery from surgery. It is not recommended that litters of kittens be separated before surgery, and upon recovery from anesthesia, they should be immediately reunited to prevent unnecessary anxiety.

Alley Cat Rescue strongly believes that feral cat caretakers can be leaders in the effort to increase early age spay/neuter of kittens. As individuals who deal directly with feral cats, caretakers are in a special position to stop overpopulation at its source. When possible, caretakers should try to

trap feral kittens between eight and 16 weeks of age to be spayed or neutered. If your veterinarian does not provide early age sterilization for kittens, you can inform them of its life-saving benefits and encourage them to adopt this low-risk procedure.

If we do not actively work to increase the number of cats spayed before they can have litters of their own, we are passively allowing overpopulation to continue. With early age spay/neuter, we can help cats and save lives.