

# Early Age or Pediatric Spay/Neuter

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Traditionally, veterinarians sterilized kittens around six months of age. However, studies and statistics have shown that early age or pediatric spay/neuter surgery — between eight and 16 weeks of age — is safe and provides greater short- and long-term health benefits over waiting until later in development (Kusritz, 2002; Howe et al., 2000). Statistics also show that cats (and dogs) who are the healthiest and live the longest reside in states that have the highest spay and neuter rates (Banfield Pet Hospital, 2013). Early age spay/neuter is more commonly practiced than later-age procedures among veterinarians, yet some misconceptions surrounding this topic still remain.

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, and 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 (Banfield Pet Hospital, 2013). Similar is true for male cats. Neutering decreases the chance of male cats developing prostatic enlargement and disease and eliminates the risk of testicular cancer (Banfield Pet Hospital, 2013).



Alley Cat Rescue

*A beautiful spring kitten.*

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. Neutering a male cat virtually eliminates spraying, or territorial urination. Neutered males also tend to be less aggressive (they fight less) and they roam less (they are not in search of mates). Unneutered cats are at

four times the risk of being hit by a car than neutered cats, while unneutered cats are also three times more likely than neutered cats to need treatment for an animal bite (Banfield, 2013). In addition, decreased fighting reduces the chance of injuries and the risk of contracting a disease such as FIV.

All of these benefits add up to a much healthier life for spayed and neutered cats. On average, spayed females live 39 percent longer than unsplayed females, and neutered males live a full 62 percent longer than those unneutered (Banfield Pet Hospital, 2013).

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 the incentive for cat rescuers and shelters to practice 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 adoptions, including specific sterilization requirements (Hoskins, 2005).

- While some surveys 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. Eighty-four 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).

With the statistics showing a low compliance rate on the agreements that the adopters have with shelters, along with the misconception that cats cannot get pregnant prior to six months of age, it has become more common for shelters and rescue groups to spay and neuter before adoption. With around three to four million cats and dogs destroyed each year in shelters, it is clear that overpopulation is the greatest killer of companion animals (The HSUS, 2014).

Some think there is an overpopulation of cats, with too many “backyard” animals being born each year, while others blame shelters, believing the shelters are not doing enough to place animals in new homes. Whatever the reasons, the bottom line is that in recent years the number of animals being euthanized has

remained static at around three million (ASPCA, accessed 2014). Though current numbers are far lower than the 12-20 million cats and dogs killed each year in this country in the late 1980s (HSUS, 2014), it is unacceptable that millions are still being killed.

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 factors will 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 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 the individual kittens. The procedure is safe, and kittens (as well as puppies) sterilized before they are twelve weeks old have even fewer complications from surgery than in procedures done on older cats (Lieberman, 1987). As long as veterinarians take the proper precautions, the risk to kittens receiving this surgery is minimal (Aronsohn and Fagella, 1993).

Such precautions include weighing kittens to ensure they are at least two pounds prior to undergoing surgery and closely monitoring their body temperature during and after surgery to prevent hypothermia; a warmed sheet or towel



Maggie Funkhouser

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

can be placed under the surgical sheet during surgery, while a heating pad should be placed in a kitten's cage when coming out of anesthesia. 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 efforts 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 her of its life-saving

benefits and encourage her 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.



Alley Cat Rescue

*Feral kittens rescued by Alley Cat Rescue.*