

NEUTERING/SPAYING YOUR PET

While the term "neutered" has become somewhat synonymous with "castrated," neutering refers to the surgical sterilization of both the male and the female. Neutering involves the removal of the ovaries or testicles, the organs responsible for making eggs and sperm. In the female, the uterus, where fertilized eggs develop into fetuses, is removed as well.

Neutering is performed as early as 6 weeks of age at some animal shelters, but is more commonly done at 6 to 8 months in veterinary practices. This simple, inexpensive procedure requires general anesthesia and, in some cases (depending on hospital policy), pre-anesthetic blood tests and an overnight stay in the hospital. Most veterinarians now routinely use post-operative pain medication to make the patient as comfortable as possible.

There are many reasons to have your pet spayed or neutered. The tremendous pet overpopulation problem is among the most common arguments used to encourage pet owners to surgically sterilize their pets. While the number of unwanted puppies and kittens that are euthanized annually by humane organizations is staggering, pet overpopulation is but one of the reasons to neuter your pet.

Neutering may play a role in preventing certain behaviors that are considered undesirable in pets; males tend to be affected most significantly. Neutered pets are often less aggressive towards other animals and their human friends. Castration of male cats, especially at an early age, may reduce urine marking and spraying, limiting the cost of cleaning or replacing carpets damaged by this behavior. In addition, mounting and other sexual behaviors that many owners find embarrassing may be curbed by surgical sterilization.

There are many medical reasons for neutering your pet as well. Sterilized animals often live longer than intact animals. Castrated males have less of a tendency to roam neighborhoods than their intact counterparts. This substantially reduces the risk of being hit by a car or being involved in a fight. In addition to the wounds created by fighting, infectious diseases such as feline immunodeficiency virus and rabies may be passed between combatants. Castrating males removes the risk of testicular cancer and greatly reduces the risk of developing prostate disease and prostate cancer. Spaying female dogs before their first heat reduces the risk of developing mammary cancer to 0.05%; the risk increases dramatically with each heat cycle she experiences. Properly removing the uterus makes the risk of developing uterine infections and cancer nearly nonexistent.

Arguments against neutering pets, especially male pets, are usually based on false beliefs or machismo. "He needs something to lick" is a poor excuse for risking your pet's health. Likewise, the argument that neutering prevents the development of some "desirable" secondary sex characteristics, like big muscular heads in tomcats and some breeds of dogs, is a poor reason not to neuter. All cats and most breeds of dogs are sexually mature and fully-grown by one year of age. Those owners desiring these characteristics may simply delay this simple procedure until their pet is a young adult.

In short, the health benefits and social reasons for neutering your pets far outweigh the "benefits" of not neutering. If your pet is intact and over the age of 6 months, talk to your veterinarian about surgical sterilization.

