

The Truth About Spaying or Neutering Your Cat

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FROM THE WEBMD ARCHIVES

An estimated 5 million to 8 million animals are euthanized in shelters across this country every year. Many organizations are working to decrease that number by opening low-cost spay/**neuter** clinics that will prevent more litters of **cats** that need homes. One such organization is LifeLine Animal Project, an Atlanta-based nonprofit shelter and clinic where more than 25,000 spaying and neutering procedures have been performed since 2005. Here, executive director Rebecca Guinn answers the most commonly asked questions about spaying and neutering **cats**.

Q: Why should I have my cat spayed or neutered?

A: Shelter euthanasia is the number one killer of companion animals. Spaying and neutering is the only way to reduce or eliminate that. It's also better for your pet's health. And having a cat that's spayed or neutered will make your life easier.

Q: Shouldn't I let my cat have a litter before I spay her?

A: No. It greatly reduces the risk of certain cancers if you have her spayed before the first heat and certainly before she has a litter.

Most places are overrun with kittens. There are millions of cats and kittens that need homes and millions more that are abandoned. There simply aren't enough homes for all the cats that get born every kitten season.

Q: Should I let my cat have a heat before I spay her?

A: It's a myth that animals should have a litter or a heat before they are spayed. There are no health benefits to that at all, and it's a much easier medical procedure if you spay before the first heat. All the benefits you get from spaying or neutering your pet are magnified by spaying or neutering before the animal reaches puberty.

Q: Is it OK to spay my cat when she's just a kitten?

A: Yes, as long as she's at least eight weeks of age and weighs at least two pounds. Pediatric spaying and neutering is widely accepted. Those ideas about needing to wait are really antiquated and the evidence is to the contrary. Even the American Veterinary Medical Association supports early spaying and neutering.

Cats can go into heat very early. They can have a litter at six months of age, and they can have three litters a year. Also, if you've ever been around a cat in heat, you know it's miserable for people. They yowl loudly and continuously. They want to get out. It really alters their **behavior**. And every unneutered male cat in the neighborhood will be at your house **spraying** your front door. Your whole house will reek of cat spray. It is a really regrettable experience.

Q: It can cost more than a \$100 to get a cat spayed or neutered. I can't afford that. What can I do?

A: There are a lot of low-cost options all over the country. **ASPCA** keeps a database of them on its web site. You can put in your zip code and find all of the options within a certain radius. Click on the "pet care" tab and look for the low-cost and free spay/neuter database.

Q: Don't cats get fat once you spay or neuter them?

A: A healthy weight goes back to portion control and exercise. I recommend cats be kept indoors, so you should have enough environmental enrichment to keep your cat happy. Have vertical spaces and climbing trees. Provide places where they can hide and play. But portion control is the main thing. Don't free feed your cat.

Q: Will my tomcat stop running away from home if I neuter him?

A: We don't recommend having free-roaming cats. And if you have an unaltered male cat, you're probably not seeing much of him anyway.

Usually, neutering a tom will curb its desire to roam, although cats are a little different than dogs and wander for reasons other than reproducing, such as hunting. So neutering will reduce the instinct to roam, but it won't eliminate it.

Unaltered males also are more at risk for feline **leukemia [FeLV]** and **FIV** [feline immunodeficiency virus]. That's because they fight, and deep bite wounds are the leading factor in the transmission of those diseases.

Q: My cat sprays all over my house. If I neuter him, will that stop?

A: More than likely it will. It will certainly take away that hormonal urge to spray. Neutering early is your best bet to avoid that urge altogether. If you have a neutered cat that is still spraying, you should see your veterinarian. It could be a behavioral issue, or it could be a health problem.

Q: Will spaying or neutering my cat prevent future illnesses?

A: You'll have a lower incidence of mammary **tumors**. We see a lot of unspayed cats come into our clinic with pyometra -- an infection of the uterus -- which can be a life-threatening disease for them.

For male cats, you eliminate testicular diseases, and for females, you eliminate the risk of uterine diseases. Generally, spayed and neutered pets live longer, happier lives.

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