

Spaying and Neutering your Pet

The decision to spay or neuter your pet is one that is frequently discussed as part of your pet's initial puppy or kitten visits. As can be expected, many owners have questions about the procedure and when to have it done.

Neutering

Neutering is the removal of both testicles. Most often this is done in male cats and dogs around 6-8 months of age. In shelter situations for population control they might even do this at a younger age. Now, there is not as great of a sense of urgency to neuter a male pet as it is to spay a female pet (we will get into that below).

Neutering can be done at any time, however, waiting until later (1 year of age or older) can come with some problems of its own. Many male cats will start to spray or male dogs will start to mark. Sometimes you can even see some behavioral changes with the increase in testosterone as these pets become more sexually mature. There has been a recent study in dogs released citing waiting until closer to a year of age, more specifically in large breed dogs, may offer better long term skeletal and joint health. Specifically in Golden Retrievers it may even reduce their risk for developing splenic cancer. It is also recommended to consider waiting until over a year of age for neutering Rottweilers (particularly males) as it may reduce the risk for osteosarcoma, a bone cancer. The link to the study can be found at the bottom of this article. Now, there are some drawbacks to the study in terms of population size, etc, and more studies likely will need to follow. However, publication of this study has led veterinarians to have a discussion of pros and cons to timing of sterilization in dogs. Finally, if you decide to not neuter your pet, in particular your dog, you should consider the possible complications of owning an intact male. Some diseases seen in intact males is a higher risk for prostatic disease and prostatic enlargement, testicular cancers, a higher incidence of perianal adenoma formation (masses around the anus), and perineal hernias. With several of these diseases, part of the treatment plan is neutering.



Spaying

Spaying or ovariectomy, is the removal of both ovaries and the uterus. Like neutering this is most often performed around 6-8 months of age and in shelter situations may be done earlier. While the same study mentioned with neutering holds true for possible benefits for large breed female dogs regarding possible benefits for joint health, etc, there are more factors to take into consideration when considering timing. Around 8 months or older most dogs and cats will start to have their first heat cycle. Occasionally it can happen around 6-7 months or maybe later around 12 - 14 months. Most dogs will then cycle every 6 months on average and cats will cycle more frequently. There is almost a 66% reduced risk in mammary cancer when dogs and cats are spayed before their first heat cycle and about a 33% reduced risk if spayed before the second. After the second there is no reduced risk. For that reason many owners will want to discuss the pros and cons of waiting until a year of age or having their spay done younger. This is because often if you are waiting until 1 year of age most pets will have a heat cycle by then. Finally, if you decide not to spay your pet, you should be aware of possible diseases that can result. We have already mentioned mammary cancer, but they will be at risk for ovarian or uterine cancers as well. A pyometra is another big concern, one that can be life threatening. A pyometra is a uterine infection that can make pets very sick and may even potentially result in death if not treated. Treatment for a pyometra is an emergency spay which carries a much higher risk of a variety of complications. The older a female is, the higher the risk you have for developing a pyometra. If you would like more information on pyometra please see our separate article on this condition. If you are considering breeding your dog, please see our separate article on breeding. We recommend when your pet is finished with breeding to have her spayed.

Article: Assisting Decision-Making on Age of Neutering for 35 Breeds of Dogs: Associated Joint Disorders, Cancers, and Urinary Incontinence
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7359819/>

