

Appendix 4

Neutering

Neutering, sometimes known as ‘sterilizing’, is the removal of the reproductive organs.

Spay

This is the surgical removal of the ovaries and uterus (womb) of a female cat.

Castration

This is the surgical removal of the testes of a male cat.

Why Neuter?

Population control

The most obvious reason for neutering is to avoid unwanted litters. An unneutered female cat can produce on average 2–3 litters a year with an average litter size of 3–5 kittens. This means that an unneutered queen cat could produce 15 or more kittens a year, which could add up to more than 150 kittens in an average lifetime (Robinson and Cox, 1970). An unneutered tom could be responsible for very many more, all of which would require caring homes, but sadly the majority would end up as strays, in rescue shelters or euthanized.

Health issues

- Pregnancy, giving birth and lactation are physically demanding for a female cat and repeated pregnancies can seriously affect her health.
- An unneutered female in oestrus (the time when she is sexually receptive, often known as being ‘in season’) may attract entire males who are less likely to be vaccinated or well cared for and therefore more likely to have infectious and potentially contagious diseases. Likewise, an unneutered male may be attracted to less well cared-for unneutered females.
- Infectious diseases and congenital disorders can be passed onto the kittens.
- As well as avoiding all of the above, neutering also greatly reduces the likely incidence of mammary tumours and pyometra (infection of the womb), both of which can be life threatening.

Control of undesirable behaviours

Urine marking (spraying)

Although neutered cats may still urine mark in response to stress, spraying is a behaviour that occurs far more commonly and frequently in unneutered males who use strong-smelling urine to mark their territory, which can include other people's property as well as your own. Entire females will also spray when in oestrus. Neutering greatly reduces the incidence of urine marking.

Vocalizing

Female cats 'call' loudly and frequently when in season. Males also vocalize loudly during the mating season when they become aware of a sexually receptive female.

Fighting

Fighting between unneutered tomcats is far more frequent, loud and intense than fights between neutered cats, and can often result in injury to one or both cats.

Roaming

Unneutered males will roam over considerable distances to find a receptive female and be at greater risk from road traffic accidents and other dangers.

When to Neuter

Kittens should be neutered before they become sexually mature. Males can be castrated as soon as the testes have descended and, to avoid pregnancy, a female should be spayed before her first season. The timing of a female's first season can vary; the majority will have their first season at around 6 months of age, which for many years has been the traditional age of neutering. However, a kitten can come into season as young as four months of age (Joyce and Yates, 2011).

Anaesthesia and surgery are potentially stressful and to minimize stress it is best that neutering is performed when it does not coincide with other stressful events such as vaccination and rehoming.

The 'Cat Group', a collection of professional organizations dedicated to feline welfare, recommend neutering of pet cats at around 4 months of age, or younger for those at greater risk of early pregnancy or when the opportunity to neuter later may be limited (http://www.thecatgroup.org.uk/policy_statements/neut.html).

References

Joyce, A. and Yates, D. (2011) Help stop teenage pregnancy! Early-age neutering in cats. *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* 13, 3–10.

Robinson, R. and Cox, H.W. (1970) Reproductive performance in a cat colony over a 10-year period. *Laboratory Animals* 4, 99–112.

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