

Pet sterilization

Humane Societies, national animal welfare organizations, and veterinarians throughout the country strongly support pet sterilization, but many pet owners aren't sure if it's right for their pet. To help you make this decision, here are answers to commonly asked questions.

What is sterilization?

For a female, sterilization is called spaying. This procedure is usually performed around six months of age and involves removing both ovaries and the uterus. For a male, sterilization is called castrating or neutering (although the term "neuter" can refer to both sexes). This procedure is also performed around six months of age and involves removing both testicles. Many shelters and rescue organizations are successfully spaying and neutering pets as young as eight weeks old to help prevent pet overpopulation.

Is pet population such a problem that I should be concerned?

Yes. If you have a pet, that means you probably love animals, and don't want to be responsible for unnecessary deaths. Each year in the United States, between eight and twelve million cats and dogs are euthanized simply because no homes are available for them. If you are lucky, you may be able to place your entire litter, but you have no control over what happens to them or their future litters. If all the cats and dogs euthanized each year were people, they would more than equal the combined populations of Minnesota, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota.

Besides controlling surplus pets, are there any other reasons to sterilize my pet?

Most definitely. There are long-term health benefits for your pet. Spayed females have a far lower incidence of mammary cancer than unsplayed females, and pyometra (a serious, even life-threatening infection of the uterus, common in older unsplayed females) and ovarian cancers are completely eliminated. Testicular cancer in males is also eliminated. But the reduction of objectionable sexually-related behavior in your pet is perhaps your best reason for sterilization. The natural urges of sexually intact pets make them hard to live with: they spray urine to mark their territory, they escape to seek sexual partners or do battle with rivals, they howl, mount legs or furniture, get blood on the carpet and gather packs of amorous suitors outside your door. These bothersome, embarrassing and destructive behaviors are, with few exceptions, a thing of the past when your pet is spayed or neutered.

Won't my pet get fat after being spayed or neutered?

Not necessarily. While it is true that spaying or neutering your pet will cause some metabolic changes and reduce activity somewhat, only too much food combined with too little exercise will make your pet fat. All dogs and cats need to have their food intake carefully controlled to keep them in trim. Remember most pets are sterilized near the end of their period of rapid growth when food intake needs are leveling off. If dogs are fed as though they are pups they will probably get fat regardless of whether they are spayed or neutered.

Isn't it true that I should let my pet have a litter or at least come in season, before having her spayed?

No. There seems to be no valid reason, medical or other, for doing so. In fact, just the opposite is true. The reduction in mammary cancer mentioned above is far greater if she never comes into season at all.

How will my pet's temperament change after spaying or neutering?

If you notice any change at all, it will most certainly be for the better. A pet's temperament is determined by background and environment, and your full-of-the-dickens companion will be as fun-loving as he always was. Neutered pets do tend to be somewhat less aggressive and more gentle and affectionate. They lose part of their interest in other animals and tend to concentrate more on their human families. The reason for a supposed temperament change may be the natural maturation process, not the surgery.

Doesn't sterilization cost a lot?

Well, maybe so... many important things do cost us. Spaying or neutering your pet will probably run from \$30 to \$120 in most cases (spaying is more expensive than neutering a male since it's major abdominal surgery), but this may vary somewhat according to where you live, and the age, size, and health of the animal. Still, remember we're talking about a one-time charge for a pet who may brighten your life for fifteen years. Besides, not neutering a pet can also be expensive: it can cost a lot to patch up your intact male cat after a backyard brawl with a rival, and the increased food cost for a pregnant or nursing female as well as food and shots for her litter can quickly add up to the money you "saved" by not having the surgery.

What about a lesser operation such as tubal ligation or a vasectomy for a pet? Wouldn't it be a better idea to leave my pet more intact?

Not really. Such operations would certainly help alleviate the pet overpopulation problem, but you would still be faced with the health problems and the problem of undesirable sexual behavior (noise, roaming, spraying, etc.) which are some of your best reasons for sterilizing your pet.

I can see there are good reasons for spaying and neutering, but I still don't believe it's... well, fair to my pet... or is it?

Of course, you love your pet and want him or her to have the best life possible. But please don't project human feelings too strongly on your pet. He/She is not a person and has a less complicated mind. What your pet wants most, after primary needs for food and shelter are met, is a loving, happy relationship with you... and puppies or kittens might get in the way of that. Some females show discomfort and feelings of divided loyalty when they have a litter and still want to be your constant companion as before. Your pet is likely to be happier without the strong sexual urges which will have to be frustrated, at least a good part of the time. Dogs and cats are pragmatists: they never miss or care about "what might have been" but instead devote themselves to their owners and live full and happy lives without the parenting experience.

