



From time to time the AAFP will respond to emerging new knowledge or issues that are of concern to veterinary professionals caring for cats. Our position statements, which represent the views of the association, are available at: www.catvets.com/professionals/guidelines/position/

AAFP Position Statement

Early spay and castration

Early spaying and castration (neutering), also called prepubertal gonadectomy, is defined as surgical sterilization of sexually immature animals 6–14 weeks of age. The AAFP supports neutering early in life as a safe and effective method of decreasing cat overpopulation, and one which confers long-term medical and behavioral benefits to the individual cat.

Welfare considerations

- ❖ Pet overpopulation continues to be an overwhelming problem in the United States, with an estimated 3–4 million cats entering animal shelters every year. Of these, almost 75 per cent are euthanized.¹
- ❖ Early neutering of cats prevents reproduction and, therefore, decreases the number of unwanted and unowned cats.

The veterinarian's responsibility and duty

- ❖ Studies show that neutering can be performed safely in kittens as young as 6–14 weeks of age. However, it is the responsibility of the veterinarian to decide when it is the best time to neuter each cat. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) advises: 'Just as for other veterinary medical and surgical procedures, veterinarians should use their best medical judgment in recommending at what age sterilization should be performed for individual animals.'² Many veterinarians have a weight limit, often of 1 kg, below which they do not perform this surgery, as this weight is generally accepted as reflecting mature hepatic function.
- ❖ It is imperative that the veterinarian educates clients regarding the importance of early neutering of cats. Educating pet owners on this issue is crucial, because many owners do not know the benefits of early neutering, or that cats can start spraying, or become pregnant, before 6 months of age. Also, clients often do not know that it is safe to neuter at a young age.

Benefits to the individual cat

- ❖ **Health benefits** Neutering reduces the risk of mammary carcinoma and prevents diseases of the uterus, ovaries and testes.^{1,3} Some studies suggest that neutered animals may have a longer life span than intact animals.⁴ One study showed that cats that underwent early neutering had decreased asthma, gingivitis and hyperactivity, but shyness was increased.⁵ Male cats that underwent early neutering demonstrated increased hiding.^{3,5}
- ❖ **Behavioral benefits** Behavioral problems, such as roaming, urine marking, fighting, inappropriate urination, unique behaviors of estrus and aggression, are among the most common reasons that cats are abandoned, relinquished and euthanized. Early neutering eliminates or decreases these unwanted behaviors, thereby enhancing the human–animal bond and increasing the likelihood that owners will keep their cats.
- ❖ **Anesthetic and surgical benefits** Early-age sterilization is surgically and medically safe. Some of the advantages

include a shorter operative time, better intra-abdominal visualization and rapid recovery.⁶ Veterinarians should follow appropriate anesthetic protocols.

Opposition to early spaying and neutering

- ❖ Concerns have been voiced regarding the safety of anesthesia and surgery in young animals, and potential detrimental effects on their development, including obesity, possible decreased ability of the immune system to respond to challenge with infectious disease agents, delayed closure of physes of the long bones, and predisposition to obstructive lower urinary tract disease.
- ❖ Studies suggest that early neutering is not associated with serious health problems and does not seem to adversely affect skeletal, physical or behavioral development in the cat.⁶

Education

- ❖ Educating the public on the health and behavioral benefits of early neutering in cats will help alleviate overpopulation, and lead to less euthanasia and healthier cats.

Public policy

- ❖ Early neutering is endorsed by the AVMA, American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), American Humane Association (AHA), The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Association of Shelter Veterinarians, Society for Theriogenology, American College of Theriogenologists, and The Cat Fanciers' Association/Winn Feline Foundation, among others.⁴

References

- 1 Griffin B, DiGangi BA, Bohling MW. A review of neutering cats. In: August JR (ed). *Consultations in feline internal medicine*. Vol 6. St Louis; Saunders Elsevier, 2010: 776–92.
- 2 American Veterinary Medical Association. Policy statement: Dog and cat population control. AVMA, revised 2009.
- 3 Fossum TW. Surgery of the reproductive and genital systems. In: *Small animal surgery*. 3rd edn. St Louis: Mosby Elsevier, 2007: 776–92.
- 4 Root Kustritz MV. Early spay–neuter: clinical considerations. *Clin Tech Small Anim Pract* 2002; **17**: 124–28.
- 5 Spain CV, Scarlett JM, Houpt KA. Long term risks and benefits of early age neutering in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2004; **224**: 372–80.
- 6 Stubbs WP, Bloomberg MS. Implications of early neutering in the dog and cat. *Semin Vet Med Surg Small Anim* 1995; **10**: 8–12.

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