

Veterinary Task Force on Feline Sterilization Recommendations for Age of Spay and Neuter Surgery

Current recommendations for the age to sterilize (spay/neuter) cats are arbitrary and inconsistent. Adoption of evidence-based guidelines is expected to limit confusion among cat owners, reduce the risk of unwanted litters, and maximize health and welfare benefits.

A task force of veterinarians and experts selected from private and corporate veterinary practice, feline specialty practice, shelter practice, organized veterinary medicine, feline health research, behavior, and academia was convened to review the currently available evidence for the 'optimum age for spaying or neutering cats.' The Veterinary Task Force on Feline Sterilization task met on January 15, 2016 in Orlando, Florida.

The following key findings and proposals emerged from a review of the currently available scientific literature and group discussion:

1. Recommendations for the optimal age to sterilize cats may differ from the age to sterilize dogs.
2. Current scientific evidence documents benefits of spaying kittens before the first estrous cycle, including the following:
 - Decreased risk for mammary carcinoma¹⁻⁴
 - Elimination of reproductive emergencies such as pyometra and dystocia
 - Avoidance of unintended pregnancies that may occur as early as 4 months of age
 - Potential decrease in behavioral problems linked with cat relinquishment.⁵
3. Current evidence does not support an increased risk for cats of complications or long-term adverse health effects with pediatric (6-14 weeks) or juvenile (>16 weeks)⁶⁻⁷ sterilization.
4. More controlled prospective research specifically examining different ages in sterilization in cats is needed. As new information becomes available, the recommended age for sterilization of cats should be revisited.
5. There is potential to increase the number of sterilized cats and reduce the unplanned/unwanted litters of kittens if veterinarians routinely schedule this surgery for client-owned cats at the end of the kitten vaccination series.

Given the known benefits of sterilization and the lack of evidence for harm related to age at which the procedure is performed, the Veterinary Task Force on Feline Sterilization calls for veterinary practitioners and professional associations to recommend sterilization of cats by five months of age. This provides veterinary practitioners with a consistent message that may increase veterinary visits and spay/neuter compliance while reducing the risk of pet relinquishment and unwanted offspring.

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