

Early-Age Spay/Neuter for Kittens

Becky Robinson, founder of Alley Cat Allies, discusses the benefits of sterilizing kittens at a young age.

By Becky Robinson

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Q: My new kitten is 12 weeks old. When I had her at the veterinarian for her vaccinations, I asked if I could schedule her spay appointment. I was told I had to wait until she was 6 months of age. This age requirement contradicts what I've heard. Is my veterinarian behind the times?

A: In short, yes. Traditionally, veterinarians have waited until cats are at least 6 months old before neutering them. But research shows that healthy kittens can be safely neutered at 6 weeks, or as soon as they weigh 2 pounds. Referred to as early-age, pediatric, or pre-pubertal spay/neuter, the procedure eliminates any chance of an "oops litter," since female cats can become pregnant as young as 4 months of age.

Early-age spay and neuter is safe. Endorsed by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Feline Practitioners, early-age spay/neuter surgery (and the anesthesia associated with it) show no adverse effects on animals both in short- and long-term studies.

"Pre-pubertal neutering is the best-kept secret in veterinary medicine. Once veterinarians try it, they will love it. Prepubes have a much lower complication rate, surgical time and will save vets both time and money while guaranteeing that our companion animal friends will never reproduce. Pre-pubertal surgery is simply a win-win situation for all parties involved," said Dr. Jeff Young, a leading veterinarian in the field of high-volume spay/neuter who established Colorado's Planned Pethood Plus Inc. in 1990.

There are many benefits to cats of early-age spay/neuter. Veterinarians who perform the surgery report that it is an easier, faster procedure; the patients recover quickly; it is the best way to prevent litters; and it is cost-effective.

Research shows that kittens neutered before 12 weeks of age have fewer complications from surgery than those over 12 weeks. Also, kittens rebound much faster after the surgical procedure, with less stress than their counterparts over 6 months old.

Early-age spay/neuter has a positive impact beyond your cat at home. Shelters should neuter before adoption to ensure that 100 percent of animals leaving their facilities are sterilized. When they neuter all kittens before going to homes, they guarantee that there is zero opportunity to reproduce — even in the youngest animals adopted. Additionally, the Association of Shelter Veterinarians' guidelines recommend neutering before cats reach sexual maturity.

This also means that cats and kittens of all ages can be neutered when you Trap-Neuter-Return feral cat colonies. No need to wait. The cats' lives are improved because they will never have the stresses and health risks associated with mating and pregnancy. The American Association of Feline Practitioners' statement on feral cats agrees: "Pre-pubertal spaying and neutering is also encouraged to decrease the numbers of newborn cats."