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Spay, neuter pets before sexual maturity

Vets generally recommend surgery be done before sexual maturity for several reasons.



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Ask the Vet columnist
 Special to the Register
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My last column dealt with some misconceptions and unusual practices regarding vaccinations and deworming in puppies (the same issues affect kittens). I would like to continue with that train of thought and address some of the issues

clients and breeders have regarding spaying (ovariohysterectomy) and neutering (castration).

Veterinarians are often asked when they feel it would be best to spay or neuter a pet. Although opinions of exactly when the procedure should be done may vary from one doctor to another, I believe the medical community is in agreement that young female pets should be spayed before the first heat cycle, and young male pets should be neutered before reaching sexual maturity. This corresponds to the pet being somewhere between 3 and 6 months old.

However, many rescue organizations and animal shelters perform sterilization procedures as early as 6 weeks of age. Considering the pet-overpopulation problem in the U.S., this has been a very effective approach to controlling unnecessary or unwanted breeding.

If you'd like an idea of how serious the pet-overpopulation problem is, the Humane Society of the United States says that every year, 6 million-8 million dogs and cats enter shelters in the United States, and 3 million-4 million of those animals are euthanized. As you can see, anything we can do to discourage unwanted pet breeding makes sense.

The problem veterinarians face in

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discussing spaying and neutering with some pet owners is that we have to overcome the biases and misconceptions that some pet owners have about the timing of the procedure, as well as the misinformation some of them have received.

Let's address some of the common misconceptions we hear:

•"It is 'unnatural' to sterilize a pet before sexual maturity." "If a female doesn't go through her first heat cycle, she will have psychological problems."

I am aware of only one problem, and that is connected to *not* spaying a female pet before her first heat. Just one heat cycle dramatically increases the risk of developing mammary cancer later in life. I really don't think pets care when they are altered, and I don't think they suffer psychological problems if they are spayed or neutered at an early age.

•"I want my pet to grow as large as possible, so I am going to delay the early spay/neuter."

In reality, allowing your pet to reach sexual maturity actually inhibits growth because the sex hormones cause the end of the bones to close, thus stopping growth. If you really want your pet to reach maximum growth, early spaying or neutering is advised.

•"I don't want my male cat to develop urinary blockage, so I will neuter him when he gets older."

There is no conclusive evidence that waiting on sterilization increases the incidence of urinary blockage, or the size of the male urethra.


•"I don't want my female to have urinary incontinence when she gets older, so I am going to wait on the spay procedure."

Not all spayed female dogs develop incontinence. If they do, it is not determined by the timing of the spay procedure. This is not a valid medical reason to delay the surgery.


•"My pet will get lazy and fat if I spay/neuter early."

Spaying and neutering eliminates the sex hormones, and pets that are sterilized will have a lower metabolic rate. They will not, however, get fat and lazy just because they are sterilized. They have to be overfed and underexercised, which can happen regardless of when – or if – sterilization occurs. The key is to decrease the daily caloric intake by about 20 percent and not to "free feed" the pet by leaving a heaping bowl of food down all day so the pet can eat as much as it wants.

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•"I want my boy to feel like a man so I am not going to neuter him now."


Well, "feeling like a man" will include marking territory every 15 seconds on a walk or having your male cat spraying stinky urine all over your walls. This is in addition to that lovely mounting behavior that so endears our pets to us. If this is what you mean by having him "feel like a man," I can't argue with your logic, although most of us would do anything in our power to eliminate those behaviors. As you can see, there are good reasons why veterinarians recommend that pets undergo sterilization surgery before sexual maturity.

Contact the writer: Got questions for Dr. David Gordon? E-mail dr.davidgordon@cox.net. We're sorry, but questions cannot be answered individually.

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