

The Truth About Juvenile Spay/Neuter

When is the right time to spay or neuter puppies and kittens?



► By Richard Allen, DVM - Best Friends veterinarian

Timing is everything when it comes to spay and neuter. Most people who care about animals today want to spay or neuter the pets they bring into their home. But even the best intentions can get waylaid, and if plans to take Fluffy or Fido in to be fixed are delayed just one day too long, a new litter can easily result.

That's why every organization or person that places animals in new homes *must* have them spayed or neutered before adoption. It's a policy that we never waiver from here at Best Friends. And it is something that cannot be left to the new pet owner, no matter what promises they make.

If animals are routinely spayed or neutered before placement, there's no risk factor that they'll create more puppies and kittens to add to the throng of unwanted offspring that already exists.

This policy of "fixing" before adoption requires that I spay or neuter puppies and kittens as well as adult dogs. Early spay/neuter is surrounded with loads of myths and misinformation. I am passionate about this issue and wish to give you the facts so you may share them and spread the word about this essential procedure.

When should an animal be spayed or neutered?

The answer to this question depends on the situation. If the animal is available for adoption, the pet should be fixed before the new owner receives the pet, regardless of the animal's age. (Clearly animals that are too young to be spayed or neutered are too young to be adopted!)

If the animal is already owned, spay/neuter can be incorporated into the shot series. Fixing the animal when the rabies shot is given works great. Here at Best Friends, rabies shots are given at 16 weeks.

How young can an animal be when fixed?

Puppies and kittens can be spayed very early — as young as four weeks. The goal here is to get them fixed and ready to go as soon as they are weaned.

I routinely spay/neuter at six to eight weeks. These surgeries are called juvenile spay/neuter or early spay/neuter. The procedure

is quick and easy and works great.

Remember that kitties can go into heat and get pregnant as early as five months of age, which is a bit like babies having babies. So, a little procrastination by the new owner can result in undoing all the good we did adopting the animal in the first place.

Does early spay/neuter affect the look or health of the pet?

Years of careful observation have shown that pets that were fixed very young have lives that are as long and healthy as any other.

Two considerations that have been studied closely are the way that bones grow and the differences in body mass of those animals that were fixed early on. There is very little difference between early altering and later altering in these pets. Originally, there was some concern about male cats experiencing potential urinary blockages. Now we know that male cats have the same chances of urinary blockage with or without early fixing.

Is early spay/neuter risky or dangerous?

Any surgery has inherent risks. We try to reduce risks to as close to zero as possible by knowing our procedure and diligently watching our patients.

Young animals heal fast and are lower surgical risks than older animals who may be obese, in heat, pregnant, or ill. Moreover, young animals are more predictable and wake up faster after anesthesia. Perhaps we were all the strongest when we were babies.

Why don't all veterinarians do early spay/neuter?

I can only tell you why I didn't do early spay/neuter in my private practice before coming to Best Friends. I was afraid to. I had been to a veterinary school that did not mention early spay/neuter or teach the techniques that make it a simple, safe, and effective procedure. Moreover, I was not given the knowledge of the benefits and the lack of harmful side effects.

It is time for a call to arms amongst all veterinarians against the pet overpopulation problem in this country. Early spay/neuter is a valuable tool in this epidemic and all pets are the winners. 🐾

Lots of articles have been written about early spay/neuter. Here are a few of them.

1. Short-Term Results and Complications of Prepubertal Gonadectomy in Cats and Dogs. JAVMA 211[1]:57-62 Jul '97
2. Prepubertal Gonadectomy in Dogs and Cats – Part II Compend Contin Educ Pract Vet 21[3]:197-201 Mar '99 Review Article 18
3. Prepubertal Gonadectomy in Dogs and Cats – Part I Compend Contin Educ Pract Vet 21[2]:103-111 Feb '99 Review Article 18
4. The Effect of Prepubertal and Postpubertal Gonadectomy on Penile Extrusion and Urethral Diameter in the Domestic Cat Vet Radiol 37[5]:363-366 Sep/Oct '96 Review Article 23
5. Prepubertal gonadectomy in the dog: Effects on skeletal growth and physical development Vet Surg 18[1]: 61 Jan/Feb '97
6. Gonadectomy in immature dogs: effects on skeletal, physical and behavioral development. JAVMA 1991 Apr 1;198(7):1193-203
7. Effects of prepubertal gonadectomy on physical and behavioral development in cats. JA VMA 1996 Dec 1;209(11):1864-71
8. Implications of early neutering in the dog and cat. Semin Vet Med Surg (Small Anim) 1995 Feb;10(1):8-12

For more references and further information, contact Dr. Allen at the sanctuary or e-mail him at drbunnyman@aol.com