

Knowing When to Nip it in the ... Buds

Survey of scientific literature suggests the healthiest age to spay and neuter pets

BY ALEXANDRA KLEINKOPF

Few humans can say they've had a gonadectomy—but the surgery remains the most common veterinary procedure performed in the U.S. today, not to mention the most effective guard against domestic animal overpopulation and all its subsequent ills.

But when it comes to the old “snip, snip,” how old should cats and dogs be when the surgery is performed?

It's already hard enough to get pet owners to spay or neuter, let alone tell them that the surgery must happen within a specific timeframe. How can one assure owners that a gonadectomy (the scientific term for removal of the sex organs of an animal of either gender) won't come with health risks for their pet?

A recent summary of studies on the issue (“Determining the optimal age for gonadectomy of dogs and cats,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, Vol. 231, No. 11) shed a flicker of light on the complicated topic.

Author Margaret V. Root Kustritz, D.V.M., reported that most vets in the country spay and neuter dogs and cats between 6 and 9 months of age, though there is no conclusive evidence that this is the ideal time. Studies have shown, however, that a series of health benefits and risks can result from the procedure, and that the specifics of those risks and benefits vary according to the animal's age when the surgery is performed.

Besides the social benefit of fewer strays filling up shelters and living on the streets, gonadectomies in male cats prior to puberty curtail many problem behaviors that can make an unneutered cat a poor house pet. In cats and dogs of both genders, gonadectomies also remove the possibility of cancers developing in reproductive organs and other areas affected by hormones.

For instance, “sexually intact dogs and cats have seven times the risk of



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developing mammary gland neoplasms when they get older, compared with the risk for spayed dogs and cats,” Kustritz writes. If a dog is spayed before her first heat, she has only a 0.5 percent risk of developing mammary tumors when she gets older. If spayed after her first heat, the risk increases to 8 percent; after her second heat, to 26 percent. The evidence, Kustritz writes, indicates that dogs should be spayed after 3 months of age to lessen the chance of urinary incontinence, but before their first heat.

Unfortunately for male dogs, castration seemed to have the inverse effect on prostate tumors, raising the risk for a neutered dog to anywhere from 2.4 to 4.3 times that of an unneutered dog. Kustritz therefore notes that while it is important for shelter populations to be spayed and neutered, the societal benefit of population control should not outweigh consideration of the health interests of an individual owned pet.

In general, Kustritz writes, spayed and neutered cats and dogs seem to face higher risks of other health problems like obesity, diabetes, and certain types of cancer, irrespective of what age they have the surgery. There has yet to be any conclusive explanation for this—and despite these findings, studies have also concluded that the average lifespan of spayed or neutered animals is longer than those who remain intact. One explanation for this is the possibility that neutered animals have owners who are more involved with their care and health overall. **AS**

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