

Sterilisation, Part I

'Heat' or being 'in season' is the time when the female dog or cat is hormonally ready to mate, and can become pregnant if she is mated by an unneutered male.

Female dogs usually cycle once every 6 months, lasting for up to 3 weeks. A female cat will come into season multiple times during the year, sometimes as often as every 2-3 weeks. During heat both dogs and cats will be more stressed, irritable and nervous than usual, and they may even become aggressive. The dog will display physical symptoms of heat such as genital swelling, and you will likely notice blood spots around the house and yard, especially in her sleeping area. A cat's heat is characterised by behaviours such as howling and excessive rubbing.

Males, both cats and dogs, can detect the scent of a female on heat even if she is kilometres away. They are driven to go out in search of her, exposing themselves to many dangers, and often becoming difficult to control. Females are also compelled by their hormones to seek out a male, which often results in them running away. You may not be able to take your female dog to public places for walks or training during her heat, and female dogs and cats may even need to be kennelled or otherwise confined, in order to protect them from the unwanted attentions of males.

Is there anything that can be done to prevent pregnancy and the symptoms of heat? Let's consider sterilisation as an option.

What is sterilisation?

Sterilisation (or neutering) refers to the surgical procedure to remove the reproductive organs – in females, the ovaries and uterus are removed (called a spay); and in males, the testicles are removed (a castration). For both males and females, dogs and cats, the operation is quite straightforward, but needs to be performed by a veterinarian, under general anaesthetic.

The basic benefits of sterilisation

First and foremost, sterilisation prevents pregnancy and the complications arising from pregnancy and delivery, such as caesarean sections, false pregnancy, milk fever, and injuries during mating.

Sterilisation also eliminates the heat cycle and the potentially inconvenient and annoying behaviours associated with being on heat. For female dogs, this means no spotting blood [while various types of diapers are available, most dogs find these uncomfortable and will not wear them. Prescription hormonal preparations that postpone or suppress heat are available, but these carry a significant risk of side effects.] A cat in season can be very vocal. Sterilisation eliminates yowling and crying, and both you and the neighbours will get a good night's sleep.

For both dogs and cats, particularly for males, sterilisation reduces the distracting and destructive behaviour associated with their efforts to get out and find a mate. It prevents unwanted and unwelcome males coming from far and wide to seek out your female. In short, sterilisation makes it less likely that your pet will get lost, run over, or into a fight.

Neutering usually also eliminates sexual discomfort, frustration and distraction, making your pet happier and more content. Frisky and Friendly should be more focussed on you rather than on trying to find a mate.

Other health benefits

Sterilisation provides many other health benefits for dogs and cats, besides the immediately obvious ones referred to above.

In a female, she will not be subject to many health problems, such as ovarian cysts and tumours of the womb and ovaries. Sterilisation also reduces the risk of pyometra (an infection of the uterus, which can prove fatal). If spayed before the first season, the risk of malignant mammary cancer is minimal. With every cycle, the risk increases. In males, neutering reduces the risk of prostate, testicular and other cancers.

Because sterilisation reduces roaming and fighting, it also decreases the risk of injuries. In cats, the risk of catching infectious diseases such as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is reduced.

Other behavioural benefits

Neutering also reduces the likelihood or severity of other behavioural problems. Unneutered male cats spray strong smelling urine to mark their territory. Neutering will reduce the urge to spray, and will likely reduce the aggressive behaviour associated with guarding territory. Neutered male dogs will also reduce their need to scent-mark. Sterilisation also reduces hormone-related aggression and dominance.

In dogs, sterilisation **does not** affect guarding instincts. While aggressive tendencies may be reduced, sterilisation does not detract from a dog's intelligence and ability. There is no reason why Frisky will not continue to be alert to strangers or unusual circumstances.

Be aware however, that neutering will not solve all problem behaviours. If certain behaviours have become deeply ingrained (such as mounting human and furniture legs) they are unlikely to change due to sterilisation alone. Training and behaviour modification may still be required

Social responsibility

Every month of every year, untold numbers of dogs and cats end up at the SPCA or Wet Nose or other animal welfare organisations, unwanted, unloved, abused. We have a pet overpopulation problem – there are just not enough good homes for them all. Preventing unwanted litters is just one more important reason to neuter your pets.