



Early Age Spay-Neuter

(Last Reviewed: May 2020)

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians supports early-age (6-16 weeks old) spay-neuter of dogs and cats as part of a comprehensive, non-lethal, population control strategy. The veterinary surgeon should use discretion regarding patient selection, taking into account the availability of staff expertise and equipment to care for pediatric surgical patients.¹ For shelter animals, sterilization prior to sexual maturity is strongly recommended to ameliorate pet overpopulation, prevent unintended litters, and ensure compliance with legal and organizational contractual obligations.²⁻⁴

Numerous studies have demonstrated the medical soundness of early-age spay-neuter procedures, including safe anesthetic and surgical techniques, shorter and less complicated surgeries, and faster recovery times.⁵⁻¹⁰ Some large studies have demonstrated increased life expectancy of sterilized dogs and cats. There is strong evidence for a decrease or elimination of common conditions such as pyometra, mammary tumors, testicular and ovarian tumors, and a reduction in undesirable reproductive behaviors among neutered animals.^{5, 10-16} For animal shelters, sterilization of free-roaming pets results in reduced shelter intake, increased adoption rates, and reduced euthanasia.^{17,18}

Some retrospective studies have suggested associations between spay-neuter and risk of cancer or orthopedic diseases in large breed dogs.^{2-3, 11} No such associations have been documented in small breed dogs or cats. Such reports variably define “early age,” are limited to purebred dogs, and are challenging to interpret. When evaluating the literature, findings from retrospective studies, small populations in teaching hospitals, specific dog breeds, and different species should not be extrapolated to all dogs and cats.^{12,19} More robust research, especially prospective studies in larger populations, is warranted.

In cases of privately-owned dogs and cats who are not free roaming, the decision to spay or neuter should be based on professional guidelines, veterinary advice, owner preferences, and the health of individual animals.^{20,21} For shelters, the current veterinary literature indicates that early-age spay-neuter is safe, effective, imparts long-term physical and behavioral health benefits, and combats overpopulation and euthanasia of unwanted, homeless dogs and cats.^{10, 22-25}

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The mission of the ASV is to advance and support the practice of shelter medicine in order to improve community animal health and well-being.

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