**Feline Ovariohysterectomy (Spay)**

Spaying your cat is an important part of basic cat health care. Spaying at a young age prevents mammary cancer and spaying at any age prevents unwanted kittens, pyometra, noisy heat cycles, and possibly even urine marking in the house. The following is a list of frequently asked questions. We have found that even though the cat spay is a routine and a commonly performed procedure, many pet owners still have questions. Hopefully, this document will be helpful.

**Pyometra**



Pyometra is the life-threatening infection of the uterus that generally occurs in middle-aged to older females in the weeks following heat. The hormone progesterone, which primes the uterus for potential pregnancy, does so by causing proliferation of the blood-filled uterine lining and suppressing uterine immune function. It is thus easy during heat for bacteria in the vagina to ascend to the uterus and cause infection. The uterus with pyometra swells dramatically and is filled with pus, bacteria, dying tissue, and toxins. Without treatment, the cat is expected to die. Despite her serious medical state, she must be spayed quickly if her life is to be saved.

The main difference between the feline and canine pyometra is that a cat with a pyometra appears surprisingly well despite the serious medical condition present. Usually the copious purulent discharge is noted but the cat is eating and grooming normally as if nothing much is going on. As with dogs, the pyometra can be open or closed and can be treated with surgery or with prostaglandins. Cats are usually in better general health when approaching surgery and tend to have a faster recovery than dogs.

**What is actually removed during spaying?**

Spaying is an ovariohysterectomy, which means that both the ovaries and the uterus are removed. The cervix is tied off, leaving the vagina to end in a blind sac. Since it is the ovaries that are responsible for the heat cycles, possible mammary tumor development, and behavior problems, it is crucial that the ovaries be removed intact; it is best to remove the entire tract, uterus included.

**How long will my cat stay in the hospital?**

Our hospital prefers to keep surgery cases throughout the day for monitoring and supportive care. We find that sending the pet home the same day helps in reducing the stress level for the pet as they are more comfortable in their home environment and may rest easier.

**Will she have sutures?**

The spay incision is closed in several layers (the abdominal muscles, the tissue under the skin, and the skin itself may all be closed separately). Sometimes it is not necessary to place visible sutures over the incision. Skin sutures necessitate a return visit for a recheck and removal in 10-14 days. Our hospital employs both methods, shelter situations, aggressive, or feral cats almost always receive buried sutures because removal may be dangerous or impossible if pet was released.

**What can I expect regarding recovery period/incision care?**

One of the advantages of keeping cats confined the night after spaying is that they usually go bouncing out of “time out” as if nothing has happened. Some cats will not eat for the first day but if she does not seem back to normal by the day following discharge, we would like to know about it.

Cats discharged on the same day as surgery may experience more soreness if not confined to a small area. Food and water are generally withheld until the pet is home and situated for several hours, at which time you feed only half the normal amount of food, normal feeding may resume the next day. She should also be kept quiet and not allowed outside.

Later in the recovery period, it is not unusual to notice swelling at the incision site. Cats often react this way to internal sutures and this kind of swelling is common and resolves spontaneously. Such swellings are firm and there is no fluid drainage or bleeding from the incision. They generally resolve in 3 to 4 weeks.

Any fluid drainage from the incision is abnormal and if possible the cat should be rechecked as soon as you can.

**What if she is in heat at the time of spay?**

Some female cats are disruptively annoying when they are in heat, yowling and carrying on, and they are spayed to end the heat quickly. Other cats are spayed in heat randomly when the owner does not realize that the cat is in heat. Either way the spay is slightly more difficult due to the engorgement of the tissues and larger blood vessels. Spaying in heat does not carry a significant risk to the cat but, since extra surgery time is frequently required, an extra charge can be incurred.

**What if she is pregnant at the time of spay?**

Spaying can be performed at any time during the course of pregnancy. Often, the owner is unaware that the cat is pregnant. If there is any question, make it clear to your veterinarian what your wishes are should your cat be found pregnant. The incision can be closed and the pregnancy can proceed or the spay can proceed and the developing kittens will be removed along with the rest of the uterus. Due to extra work and surgery time, this will also incur an extra fee for spaying a pregnant animal.

**What’s the difference between spaying in a hospital versus spaying in a low cost spay clinic?**This question may have a very regional answer depending on what sort of low cost facilities are available in a given area. Some areas have some sort of low cost spay/neuter option (consult your local animal shelter for more information). There are some general principles that tend to hold true.

Low cost spay/neuter facilities operate on a tight budget in order to provide a low cost service and still be able to pay for supplies and staff. This means they use cheaper materials for suture and anesthesia, often have limited hours, and may not have state of the art monitoring equipment or capabilities in case of emergency. Probably most important is the fact that in order to stay in business, a low cost clinic must perform a high volume of surgeries each day. This limits the individual attention a patient can receive if an “assembly line” approach is used. Often these are the situations where only the ovaries are removed and the uterus is left behind so as to save time or where the entire spay is performed through a tiny incision only a half inch or so long so as to save time. Most of the time, the end result is the same: a spayed happy female and, of course, cost can be an important factor. It is a good idea to know what one is paying for.

A full service hospital tends to have more nursing care (such as a technician tableside monitoring anesthesia throughout the procedure), monitoring technology (EKG, pulse oximeter, blood pressure monitor, respiratory monitor etc.), fluid support, all day patient observation, safer anesthetics (which tend to be more expensive), less reactive suture materials (which also tend to be more expensive), and most importantly individual attention to each patient. As a prominent member of the surgery board once said, “Speed is not a legitimate goal in surgery. Doing a careful, meticulous job is the real goal.”

**Will spaying affect her personality?**

The female cat spends at least half the year with her reproductive tract dormant (cats only cycle seasonally, primarily in the spring and summer). This means that, behaviorally speaking, she acts spayed most of the time and no personality change should be noted. This said, it is important to realize that a cycling cat can be extremely solicitous of affection. This kind of playful, flirtatious behavior will stop with spaying.

**How long after having kittens can she be spayed?**

The mammary development that comes with nursing can make the spay surgery more difficult. Ideally, a month after weaning allows for regression of this tissue and spaying can proceed. Unfortunately, it is possible for a female cat to become pregnant during this waiting period if her owner is not careful.

**At what age can my cat be spayed?**

The traditional age for spaying is six months; however, this practice has enabled kittens to be adopted from the shelters unspayed. Often the new owner fails to return for spaying and the result is further contribution to the pet over-population problem. The last 20 years has brought us a great deal of research into “early” spaying and we now know that there is no problem with spaying as early as 4 months of age. Our hospital finds such small tissues fragile to manipulate and we like to spay our female patients when they weigh at least 4 1/2 to 5 pounds

**Will she get fat and lazy after spaying?**

Estrogens have a natural appetite suppressing effect and the loss of estrogens may lead to an increased appetite. Further, sterilization surgery has been shown to slow a cat's metabolism. Depending on the cat's age and activity level at the time of surgery, a diet change to a "lite" diet may be in order, or added playtime and exercise in your routine.

**Can she still come into heat after spaying?**

Without ovaries, she should be unable to come into heat. Rarely, a remnant of ovarian tissue is left behind by mistake. This can lead to some annoying behaviors as the female cat comes into heat (though she would be unable to get pregnant if her uterus has been removed as is customary with spaying). Special testing or even surgical exploration may be needed to determine if there is an ovarian remnant.

*Got a question we missed?* Please feel free to call our clinic any time at 618-588-2600. Once again, spaying is an important part of cat ownership and one of the most significant steps in health care that a cat owner can provide for their female cat.