

**Spaying (Ovariohysterectomy): The Benefits in Cats**

Newspaper, radio, and television all feature articles about pet overpopulation. They stress the fact that too many kittens and puppies are produced every year and that there just are not enough potential owners to go around. The obvious conclusion is to use sterilization procedures, so a large percentage of cats and dogs are incapable of breeding. Performing an ovariohysterectomy or "spaying" female animals is the best approach to decreasing the number of kittens and puppies. Being veterinarians, we also know that spaying and castrating pets are important to the average pet owner because of the health and wellbeing of their animal. So, although you may spay your animal in a effort to help a national problem, in doing so, you increase their chances of living long and happy lives!

Having a litter of kittens may seem like a fun thing to do. Some even believe that it helps their female cat develop more completely or become a better pet, in some way. Neither is true. Becoming pregnant and having kittens in no way alters the maturity level of your cat, either physically or mentally. In most cases, people find out that it is hard to find good homes for all of the kittens, even if they are advertised "free to good home". In addition, not all pregnancies go smoothly. Difficult labour, kitten mortality, and potential health problems in the mother, such as uterine and mammary gland infections, can take all the fun out of the experience.

An Ovariohysterectomy (OHE) eliminates most, if not all female hormone production. These hormones play key roles in reproduction in the cat. However, they are also responsible for many unwanted side effects.

**Disadvantages of NOT spaying your cat**

**Estrus:** Cats are spontaneous ovulators. This means a cat will ovulate, or release the eggs from her ovaries, only if she is mated. If a female cat is in heat (she will be in heat for 3-16 days) and is not mated, she will come back into heat every 14-21 days until she is mated. Physiological and behavioral patterns press upon her to mate. Being locked in an apartment or house where this is impossible causes great anxiety and frustration (for her and you!)

**Behavior and hygienic problems:** During the heat cycle there are numerous behavior problems that may develop. Females in heat will actively search out male cats and may attempt to escape from the house or yard putting them in danger of traffic, fights with other animals etc. Often there is a sudden influx of male cats around the home or yard. The howling at 2 am will affect your behaviour as well as your cat's! In addition, unspayed females may spray urine. This can be difficult to stop, and spaying is highly recommended as part of treatment for this problem.

**Mammary cancer:** Mammary cancer is the third most common cancer in cats. Reproductive hormones are one of the primary causes of mammary cancer in the cat. Cats who have been spayed have a 40-60% lower risk of developing mammary cancer then those who have not been spayed.

**Tumors of the reproductive tract:** Tumors also occur in the uterus and ovaries. An OHE would, of course, eliminate any possibility of this occurring.

**Infection of the reproductive tract:** Unspayed cats may develop a severe uterine disease called pyometra. With this disorder, bacteria enter the uterus and it becomes filled with pus. Undetected, this condition is almost always fatal. In rare cases, when the condition is found early, hormonal and antiobiotic therapy may be successful. Generally, the treatment of pyometra requires a difficult and expensive ovariohysterectomy. The toxicities resulting from the infection can strain the kidneys and heart, and in some cases may cause lifelong problems, even after the infected uterus is removed.

An ovariohysterectomy eliminates many medical and behavior problems. In fact, in many cats, an OHE probably adds years to their lives and at least provides them with a more comfortable, less stressful life. The OHE does its part in pet overpopulation, but you, as the owner of the individual cat, should also view it as a way to increase the length and quality of your pets life with you.