

## Neutering your Male Cat

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Neutering a male cat is an excellent step to help your young man grow into a loving, well-adapted household citizen. The main reason to neuter a male cat is to reduce the incidence of objectionable behaviors that are normal in the feline world but unacceptable in ours. A neutered male cat has had his testicles removed, not only ending his ability to reproduce but also removing his source of testosterone and his interest in hormone-driven behaviors.

**Roaming:** More than 90 percent will reduce this behavior with neutering. Approximately 60 percent reduce this behavior right away.

**Fighting:** More than 90 percent will reduce this behavior with neutering. Approximately 60 percent reduce this behavior right away.

**Urine marking:** More than 90 percent will reduce this behavior with neutering. Approximately 80 percent reduce this behavior right away.

Other benefits of neutering include a drastic reduction in cat urine odor, reduced incidence of feline asthma, and of gingivitis (gum inflammation). The reduction in fighting and roaming helps an outdoor male cat reduce his risk of FIV infection, bite wounds and associated abscesses, automobile-related trauma, dog/coyote-related injury, and other outdoor lifestyle situations that result from traveling away from home.

Cosmetic reasons to neuter a male cat has to do with the physical appearance. The mature tomcat is built for battle with a muscular body and facial thickenings (called shields) for protection against the bites of his combat opponents. Tomcats neutered after puberty will eventually lose these characteristics and male cats neutered before puberty never develop them.

A common shelter practice has been to adopt out a young male kitten with his new owner paying a neuter deposit, which is then refunded when the kitten is neutered at the traditional age of six months. The problem has been that new owners do not return and young cats go unneutered. Given that studies have found that approximately 70 percent of feline litters are unplanned and there is presently an enormous feline overpopulation problem, the importance of neutering cannot be overemphasized.

### What is Early Neutering?

Early neutering allows for kittens to be neutered prior to adoption thus preventing these kittens from contributing to the unplanned litter problem. There has been some controversy over this practice as it flies in the face of tradition and there have been questions about any negative health consequences of this practice.



Male cat neutered after reaching puberty. Illustration by Dr. Wendy Brooks

Some concerns that have been explored have included:

*Behavioral problems with regard to shyness or socialization issues in kittens neutered early.*

This has not borne out. Early neutered kittens share the behavioral benefits listed above and temperament problems have not been documented.

*Kittens neutered early may be stunted or small.*

Actually, early neutering delays the closure of the bone growth plates making for a slightly taller cat.

*Early neutered kittens will have a narrowed urethra that will predispose them to urinary blockage.*

This has not borne out, either. Urethral dimensions in male cats do not vary based on the age at neutering.

*Early neuter predisposes to capital physis fracture or slipping.*

There is actually some truth to this one so let us explain this orthopedic problem. Physis is the medical term for a bone growth plate; that plate is the area on an immature bone where the bone is actively growing in length. The bone in this area is softer and the two pieces can slip apart creating a problem for the growing bone. The "capital physis" is the growth plate of the head of the femur (one of the hip bones). If it slips, then surgery (a [femoral head and neck ostectomy](#)) is needed to restore function. Early neutering is one of several factors correlated to slipping a capital physis, the other risk factors are being male, and being overweight. The problem seems to be a combination of being overweight and having delayed closure of the growth plates (as occurs with neuter before age six months). This injury is not common among early neutered kittens but early neutered kittens are overrepresented among cats with this injury.

A 2002 study out of Cornell University that followed 1600 cats for 11 years found no diseases, injuries or other issues common in kittens neutered between ages 3.5 months and six months versus those neutered after age six months. Ask your veterinarian about early neutering; some prefer that kittens weigh at least 3 pounds so that the tissues are not too difficult to manipulate.

### What is Done Exactly

The feline neuter is one of the simplest surgical procedures performed in all of veterinary medicine. The cat fasts overnight so that anesthesia is given on an empty stomach. The scrotum is opened with a small incision and the testicles are brought out. The cords are either pulled free and tied to each other or a small suture is used to tie the cords and the testicle is cut free. The skin incision on the scrotum is small enough so as not to require stitches of any kind.

### Recovery

There is minimal recovery with this procedure. Some clinics discharge kittens on the same day as surgery. There should be no bleeding or swelling. It is a good idea not to bathe the kitten until the incisions have healed for 10 to 14 days from the time of surgery.



Male cat neutered prior to puberty. Illustration by Dr. Wendy Brooks

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