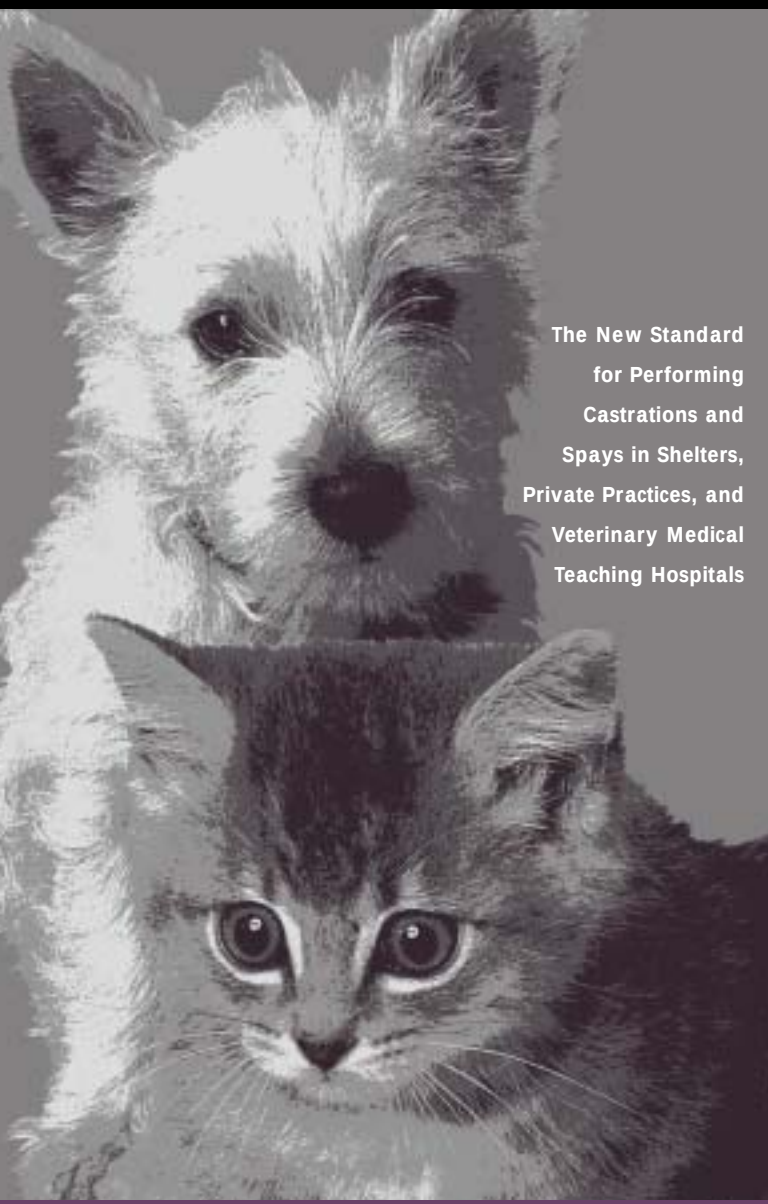
Early-Age STERILIZATION

The Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights



The New Standard for Performing Castrations and Spays in Shelters, Private Practices, and Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospitals

The Problem

Millions of unwanted cats and dogs, primarily youngsters, are killed each year in shelters in this country. Although the reasons for so many unwanted individuals are multiple and complex, one issue has to do with the age at which surgical sterilization is done and the myths surrounding this. Many people, including veterinarians, continue to believe that cats and dogs must reach sexual maturity before sterilization can safely be done despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Some cats and dogs, therefore, 'accidentally' become pregnant because they have been allowed to go into estrus ('heat') and non-castrated males find a way to them.

This problem is compounded when animals are allowed to be adopted from shelters while sexually intact. Some shelters have tried to address this aspect of the problem by requiring a financial deposit which is held until the people bring proof that the animal has been sterilized. This has not been uniformly successful in preventing unwanted or *intentional* breeding. Moreover, if the animal is young and the people feel that they must wait until sexual maturity, this increases the likelihood of 'accidental' pregnancies. Moreover, some people may decide later that they want to have 'just one litter' before sterilization.

If shelters would not allow sexually intact animals to be adopted out, then one source of breeding would be stemmed. Many of the animals desirable to the public, however, are very young. Because of the fear of doing surgery on these individuals, shelters felt they had no alternative but to adopt out the animals and hope that financial deposits would encourage compliance with sterilization. Veterinarians in private practice or teaching hospitals might also encourage their clients to sterilize their companions for purposes of population control. But, as with the shelters, there has been apprehension about doing this surgery prior to the sexual maturity. This meant that these animals also would be at risk of becoming pregnant or causing pregnancies before the 'proper' age for sterilization was reached.

The Solution

The solution in this case is simple: early-age sterilization. This is the surgical sterilization of kittens and puppies as early as 8 weeks of age. The AVAR urges that this become the new standard for performing these surgeries.

By following a protocol of early-age sterilization, shelters can completely eliminate continued reproduction by not allowing any cat or dog to be adopted until he or she is sterilized. Veterinary practitioners can include early-age sterilization after the vaccination protocol is complete at 12-14 weeks of age for cats and dogs obtained in other ways, thus reducing this aspect of the overpopulation problem. Veterinary medical schools can institute programs doing the same thing, thus teaching future veterinarians the skills and the need for early-age sterilization, resulting in generations of veterinarians more knowledgeable about the issues and better equipped to deal with them.

History and Science Prove Early-Age Sterilization Safe

The arbitrarily chosen age of 6 months for surgical sterilization was questioned back in the 1970's, and some shelters subsequently began performing early-age surgeries and documenting the effects. The response from some individuals in the veterinary community was concern about stunted growth, obesity, perivulvar dermatitis, vaginitis, behavioral changes, urinary incontinence, and increased risk of complications during surgery and anesthesia. This concern, however, has been shown to be unwarranted.

Within this population of thousands of cats and dogs subjected to early-age sterilization, there was no significant increase in the incidence of any of the undesirable conditions which veterinarians have observed for years before early-age surgery commenced. Recent university studies on early-age sterilization of kittens and puppies showed no substantial differences in important criteria between individuals done at sexual maturity and those done at an early age.

The available evidence, therefore, indicates that early-age sterilization is safe and does not lead to any more problems for the individuals than sterilization at a later age. Even if there were some minor problems yet undetected, these would pale when compared with the positive impact sterilization of kittens and puppies would have on the overpopulation problem.

Advantages of Early-Age Sterilization

Sterilization of cats and dogs is presently the most effective method of preventing unwanted or unintentional pregnancies. It is, therefore, a major tool for curbing the present staggering overpopulation of cats and dogs. In addition, it helps reduce aggressiveness, spraying, wandering, and other behaviors often associated with unsterilized animals. It reduces the possibilities of mammary cancer later in life, particularly in dogs.

If we accept that sterilization is currently a necessary component of population control for cats and dogs, then the advantages of *early-age* sterilization are numerous. There is less stress on a younger animal and a quicker recovery after the surgery. This minimizes any suffering the surgery may cause.

Doing the surgery at an early age is beneficial to the surgeon. Because of the absence of abdominal fat, it usually takes less effort and time than these surgeries take on older patients. This translates into less trauma for the patient and less time under anesthesia thus reducing the ill effects normally associated with all surgeries.

Sterilization before adoption allows shelters to adopt out animals without having to follow up on compliance with adoption terms and other tasks associated with deposits and refunds. Additionally, when shelters begin performing early-age sterilizations, experience has shown that the number of cats and dogs turned in at those shelters declines dramatically.

Private practitioners can include early-age sterilization in their kitten and puppy care packages – sterilizing the animals at the end of their vaccination series, prior to sexual maturity – thereby streamlining the process for the client and simplifying the work of the surgeon.

Reducing cat and dog overpopulation not only prevents unnecessary killing, it also is fiscally responsible. Millions of tax dollars are spent each year to provide animal control services, which include housing and killing unwanted cats and dogs.

Surgical Technique, Anesthesia, and Identification

Details of surgical techniques for early-age sterilization are well-described in the veterinary literature. Special attention must be paid when using anesthesia on younger animals. Although no one particular anesthetic protocol can be recommended, anesthetic protocols should be those which take into account pediatric concerns such as hypothermia, hypoglycemia, and stress. Additionally, adjustment of technique on the part of the surgeon is required but the surgery is less difficult than on older animals.

Because the incision point on sterilized kittens and puppies is so small, it is important to leave an identifying mark to prevent the possibility of a duplicate surgery at some point in the future. A wire suture in the abdomen or tattoo on the inner part of the leg or at the incision is recommended.

Endorsements for Early-Age Sterilization

There currently are numerous veterinary medical associations which endorse early-age sterilization in shelters. Some of these include: the American Veterinary Medical Association, the state veterinary medical associations in California, Nevada, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Wisconsin, the American Animal Hospital Association, and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association. Other organizations also endorse the practice, such as national humane organizations and the Cat Fanciers' Association.

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☐ Enclosed is my $15 for the video plus $5 for shipping and handling ($20 total).

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