

**Early Age Spay/Neuter:
More Veterinarians Learning This Valuable Procedure
Provide Better Client Service and Reduce Pet Overpopulation
at Animal Match Rescue Team, Inc. Wet Labs
By: Laura Beth Heisen**

A newborn kitten or puppy is rescued from a shelter or other dangerous situation. Fostered. Given shots. De-wormed and de-fleaed. Rehabilitated medically. Socialized. Advertised. At only three months of age, the kitten or puppy is now healthy, loves people, and is ready for a permanent home. Good? Let's look at two different outcomes.

The rescue group's veterinarian still thinks animals must be four to six months old to sterilize. The rescue group wants to place the animals sooner. So, when this kitten or puppy is placed into a permanent home, the rescue group has the new owners sign a contract to sterilize later. Two months later, Little Johnny leaves the door open. The kitten or puppy escapes. Bingo. The kitten or puppy is pregnant or causes a pregnancy.

All that effort, expense, and good intentions to rescue that one kitten or puppy, and now we have an unwanted litter. Maybe eight animals. And those eight will produce how many more, and those will produce how many more, and on and on? This is "rescue"?

Now let's change just one thing. Let's say the rescue group aligns with a veterinarian who knows how why and how to do early age spay/neuter. This veterinarian has kept up with professional learning and wants to help reduce the pet overpopulation. Now when the kitten or puppy is as young as two months of age and as small as two pounds, the kitten or puppy goes to the rescue group's veterinarian, gets spayed or neutered, and can be placed immediately into a permanent home with no need for a contract to sterilize later, and COMPLETE CERTAINTY that the kitten or puppy will never add to the pet overpopulation. Truly what rescue and veterinarians should be doing: ensuring that no unwanted animals are born.

Early age spay/neuter is done as early as when the kitten or puppy is two pounds in weight and two months of age. Although some veterinarians will do the procedure even earlier if it means getting the animal adopted from a shelter rather than euthanized, the current general rule is that a kitten or puppy should weigh at least two pounds and be two months old. The procedure is also known as "pediatric spay/neuter."

Why is this obvious answer to reducing the pet overpopulation not a more widespread practice? The answer lies in what veterinarians were taught in school. Veterinary schools only relatively recently began teaching early age

spay/neuter. Most veterinarians practicing today did not learn the technical procedure in veterinary school, and did not learn its benefits (see below).

“The old teaching in veterinary school that that animals must be six months old to spay or neuter is not supported by scientific data,” says Brenda Griffin, D.V.M., who is the Director of the Shelter Medicine Program at Auburn University School of Veterinary Medicine. “The old teaching was all based on anecdote and speculation. In fact, there is no greater risk from early age spay/neuter than there is from spay/neuter at any age,” says Dr. Griffin.

Dr. Griffin enthusiastically supports early age spay/neuter. While she says the scientific data shows early age spay/neuter to be at least as safe as later spay/neuter at a later age, she emphasizes that the early procedure is of enormous benefit to ensuring a reduction in the overpopulation. Dr. Griffin is quick to remind us of our current reality -- “the biggest killer of cats and dogs in our country is shelter euthanasia.” Early age spay/neuter can go far to reducing that huge killer.

Helping Veterinarians Learn Early Age Spay/Neuter Protocols and Benefits:

Animal Match Rescue Team, Inc. (“AMRT”), a non-profit tax exempt organization dedicated to reducing the pet overpopulation and shelter euthanasia, decided to do something about the gap in what most veterinarians learned in school and what recent years of experience have proven -- that early age spay/neuter is not only just as safe as waiting, but has even greater benefits for the patient and the veterinarian, as well as the overpopulation in general.

On two days in Fall, 2003, AMRT sponsored “wet labs” at which practicing veterinarians were invited to learn early age spay/neuter from veterinarians who have been doing the procedure for many years and who are experts in the procedure.

On October 5, 2003, Lowell Novy, D.V.M., of Simi Valley and Karen Martin, D.V.M., of Thousand Oaks taught the wet lab at Dr. Novy’s Valley Veterinary Clinic in Simi Valley. On October 12, 2003, Marvin Mackie, D.V.M. taught the wet lab at Dr. Mackie’s Animal Birth Control clinic in West Los Angeles. Dr. Mackie is the pioneer of early age spay/neuter, with many years of extensive experience in the procedure. Dr. Novy has operated spay/neuter clinics for owned and feral animals at his office on Sundays, often doing early age spay/neuter. Dr. Novy’s clinics, at which Dr. Martin often assists, are credited with reducing the feline euthanasia rate in Simi Valley by 83% in just five years. Dr. Novy says, “early age spay/neuter is an important part of the program and its great success.”

AMRT developed and, with the assistance of Dr. Novy, sponsored the early age spay/neuter wet labs. “There was no charge to veterinarians to attend,” says

AMRT Founding Director Laura Beth Heisen,“ explaining that, “we just want more veterinarians to be well-trained in and comfortable with the procedure.”

The Wet Labs: Veterinarians Learn, Watch, and Then Perform the Procedure Themselves:

At both wet labs, the attending veterinarians learned early age spay/neuter surgery and anesthesia protocols, special concerns to watch for and what to do (for example, the young patients are a bit more prone to hypothermia and hypoglycemia), and how to recognize good candidates for the early age procedure.

The attending veterinarians watched the expert veterinarians perform an early age spay surgery. Then it was time for the attending veterinarians to do it themselves! Some of the patients came from rescue groups, some were privately owned, and many of the patients had just been adopted from the Los Angeles City shelters. AMRT thanks Dr. Cassandra Smith of L.A. Animal Services for her cooperation and assistance in making the arrangements for many early age animals to be sterilized at the wet labs.

Once the attending veterinarians had received instruction and watched the procedure performed, each attending veterinarian performed spays and neuters on early age puppies and kittens, supervised by Drs. Novy, Martin, and Mackie.

In the end, 44 early age kittens and puppies had been sterilized. They went home with their new owners, or to foster care to be placed into permanent homes. Not one will have to be adopted out on a contract to sterilize later, and not one will ever add to the pet overpopulation or cause any animal to wind up at a shelter, euthanized.

Even better, Southern California now has eight more veterinarians who are trained in early age spay/neuter. Some had already had experience with the procedure and wanted to learn more; some were learning for the first time. They are Dr. Ben Alegado, Dr. Olatunji (“TJ”) Bandele, Dr. Jennifer Conrad, Dr. Wefki Girgis, Dr. Yuko Nishiyama, Dr. Kari Pohost, Dr. Valerie Tallyrand, and Dr. Michael Trimmell. Each is ready and eager to help reduce the pet overpopulation by providing early age spay/neuter services.

Dr. Novy pointed out that, since early age spay/neuter is still considered by some to be a “new” procedure, people are watching and so it is important that methods be perfect. The wet labs included information about careful patient monitoring, especially in a busy clinic environment where early age spay/neuter will often occur.

“Our goal is for more and more veterinarians to become comfortable and well-trained in the particulars of early age sterilization, so that no healthy animal ever

has to be released without first being spayed or neutered,” says AMRT’s Heisen. Another AMRT Director, Karen Snook, says, “this procedure will make a substantial difference in controlling the pet overpopulation.” Snook adds, “so many unwanted litters of kittens and puppies are dumped at shelters every day, just because someone did not sterilize their pet soon enough. Now we have more veterinarians who can help make sure that there is no reason to delay sterilizing and risk an accidental litter and the resulting tragic death.”

The Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights (AVAR) and the Southern California Veterinary Medical Association assisted with advertising the AMRT wet labs. AVAR and AMRT are now planning more early age spay/neuter wet labs for the spring and beyond. AMRT may be reached at (818) 707-2502 or CatNose1@aol.com. AVAR may be reached at (530) 759-8106 or Pam@AVAR.org.

Laura Beth Heisen is a Founding Director and Corporate Secretary of Animal Match Rescue Team, Inc., and a former Commissioner of the Board of L.A. Animal Services.

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EARLY AGE SPAY/NEUTER FACTS

What makes a good candidate for early age spay/neuter?

“Early age spay/neuter” patients should weigh at least two pounds and be at least two months old. The kitten or puppy should also be in reasonably good health and be of appropriate weight for the animal’s stature. If an animal does not meet one of these criteria, then spay/neuter should be delayed until all criteria are met, unless the animal would otherwise lose an adopter and be euthanized at a shelter.

Isn’t it safer to wait until a kitten or puppy is at least six months old?

No. As long as the kitten or puppy is at least two pounds/two months, and is of adequate weight for his or her stature and in reasonably good health, there is no health, behavioral, or other reason to wait. Scott Linder, Director of Miami-Dade Animal Control in Florida, says that in one year, his agency sterilized 12,000 patients, about one-half of them early age. Of those 12,000, two patients were lost, and both were adults. Brenda Griffin, D.V.M, the Director of the Shelter Medicine Program at Auburn State University School of Veterinary Medicine, emphasizes that early age spay/neuter concerns are based only on anecdotal speculation, with no scientific data to back up concerns. Dr. Griffin says scientific data shows no greater risk of early age spay/neuter compared with later spay/neuter. She says this is true of short-term and long-term effects. In fact, she says, as long as the patient is healthy, early age spay/neuter is safer than waiting. Dr. Griffin also says, “the biggest killer of dogs and cats in this country is shelter euthanasia, and early age spay/neuter helps greatly to reduce that killer.”

Do Veterinary Medical Associations endorse early age spay/neuter?

Yes! The American Veterinary Medical Association (“AVMA”) endorses early age spay/neuter. The AVMA position states, *“Early-Age (Prepubertal) Spay/Neuter Of Dogs And Cats: AVMA supports the concept of early (prepubertal, 8 to 16 weeks of age) gonadectomy [sterilization of males and females] in dogs and cats in an effort to reduce the number of unwanted animals of these species.* Just as for other veterinary procedures, veterinarians should use their best medical judgment in deciding at what age gonadectomy should be performed on individual animals. The Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights (“AVAR”) in Davis, California, also supports and encourages early age spay/neuter.

What are the benefits of early age spay/neuter for the patient?

Pediatric patients have faster metabolisms than older patients; this makes the anesthesia exit their systems more quickly and they recover much faster than older patients. Early age spay/neuter patients are usually eating within 30 to 60 minutes after surgery, and are usually fully awake and happily playing less than two hours after surgery. The faster digestive systems of pediatric patients makes it unnecessary to withhold food and water the night before surgery the way it is withheld for older patients; rather, pediatric patients can eat and drink the night before and can eat one-half of their usual amount the morning of surgery. Early age patients are still growing fast, so their incision tissue heals faster than if they were older. And none of these early age patients will ever have to be dumped at a shelter or tossed onto the streets for the crime of getting pregnant or spraying as happens to so many unsterilized animals, nor will they suffer sex-related illnesses such as breast or testicular cancer.

What are the benefits of early age spay/neuter for the veterinarian?

The surgical procedure itself is up to twice as fast with early age patients. This saves the veterinarian time and makes the practice more efficient and earning more money for surgical time. The procedure itself is easier, once a veterinarian has learned the procedure. Imagine wrestling an 80-pound six-month-old rottweiler to the table for anesthesia. Now imagine that same animal four months earlier, when she weighed only 17 pounds. Since recovery time is so much faster, the post-surgery process is easier and faster also. Marvin Mackie, D.V.M., says, “those of us who do early age spay/neuter call it ‘our little secret’ because only we know how easy and efficient it really is – but we want all the other veterinarians to get in on our secret and do the procedure too!”

Can’t all licensed veterinarians already do early age spay/neuter without special training?

Yes. But most veterinarians went to veterinary school before scientific data and experience established the benefits of early age spay/neuter. These veterinarians might not be comfortable with early age spay/neuter, or they might not know the special protocols for early age patients, which make the procedure safer. These veterinarians can update their professional learning about early age

spay/neuter benefits, surgical and anesthesia protocols, special concerns, what makes a good candidate for the early age procedure, and special treatment of the early age patient. The patients and their organs are usually so much smaller than what these veterinarians are used to in surgery that it is advantageous and safer to make the first attempts under the watchful eye of an expert. A related benefit is that the veterinarians learn anesthesia, surgical, and recovery procedures, which can also apply to other procedures involving pediatric patients.

What can an individual or humane group do to encourage veterinarians to offer early age spay/neuter?

If your veterinarian does not already offer early age spay/neuter, encourage him or her to learn the procedure! AMRT encourages rescue groups to do business with veterinarians who provide this much needed service, rather than with veterinarians who force the group to release animals unsterilized simply because the veterinarian does not provide early spay/neuter services. *Rescue groups and their in California counties with populations of 100,000 and their veterinarians should be aware that California law requires all animals released by rescue groups (and public shelters) to be sterilized before release unless a licensed veterinarian certifies that the animal is too sick or injured or that spay/neuter would otherwise be detrimental to the animal's health.*

How can my veterinarian participate in an early age spay/neuter wet lab?

You may refer your veterinarian to AMRT at (818) 707-2502 or CatNose1@aol.com, or to AVAR at (530) 759-8106 or Pam@AVAR.org.