



To desex or not to desex.... and if so at what age???

It is wonderful and rewarding to witness a litter of kittens or puppies being born and although some pets are used for breeding and are not desexed (a surgical procedure where males have their testes removed and females have their uterus and ovaries removed), for most dogs and cats there are a number of very good reasons why it is important to consider desexing. Further to this, there are several factors to take into consideration when electing the most suitable age for your pet to be desexed.

First and foremost desexing is used as an invaluable tool to help combat pet overpopulation, which is a huge animal welfare issue worldwide. An underlying theme in our society is that quality is exchanged for quantity and the massive number of animals that are abandoned, aren't adequately cared for or can't be rehomed by animal shelters leads to millions of dogs and cats being euthanized each year.

Except in very tractable and well behaved animals, dogs and cats (especially males) who have not been desexed are very driven by their sexual hormones to roam seeking mates, aggressive behavior when defending their territory, or generally, and inappropriate urination or territory marking. Frustration often ensues because the animal's need to express sexual behavior is not met which often escalates to destructive behavior. These behaviors are not only largely unacceptable in our society, but they often lead to injury.

Further medical considerations for desexing are mammary cancer, uterine infections, prostatic disease and hormonal imbalances. Although they have multifactorial origins, a desexed animal has a much lesser risk of developing these conditions.

All of these factors make a good case to support the desexing of cats and dogs, especially those living within close confines in an urban environment. But what are the negative points about desexing?

Dogs usually attain puberty at 7 – 12 months and cats at 4 – 9 months of age. At this point there is a greater production of sex hormones which are involved with growth and development, helping to promote the maturation of cartilage and assist with calcium deposition in bones. There is concern about some of the long term health risks of removing the benefits of these hormones.

Research has indicated that a desexed female dog is eight times more likely to suffer from urinary incontinence and it has also been suggested that pre-pubertal desexing of dogs causes an increased incidence of hip dysplasia and bladder infections and cats are more inclined to be shy and obese.

Desexing is a straightforward procedure and our modern anesthetics are very safe but complications such as excessive blood loss, infection and drug reactions do occasionally arise. In pre-pubertal animals, the procedure is generally quicker, easier, and less stressful and there is a faster recovery.

For the pet population as a whole, it is clear that desexing at a young age is an important practice that is adopted by animal shelters globally. When considering desexing your pet and the many factors relating to their specific needs as individuals, it is important to obtain guidance from your vet to help you to make the appropriate decision for their long-term health.