

HEALTH & SAFETY

When to Spay or Neuter a Cat: Kittens and Adults

The best age to spay or neuter a kitten, whether a cat can be spayed in heat, pregnant or nursing, what changes after surgery, recovery at home, and how to find low-cost spay/neuter.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 24, 2026 • 5 min read • 23 cited sources

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The short answer

Spay or neuter a kitten by 5 months of age. That is the recommendation of the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP), the AVMA and the Feline Fix by Five campaign, because a kitten can be ready to breed at 4 to 5 months. Shelters and TNR clinics routinely operate from about 8 weeks and 2 pounds.

Adult cats can be spayed or neutered too, once a veterinarian has examined them. Your vet decides the exact timing for each cat.

When to spay or neuter, at a glance

SPAY/NEUTER TIMING BY SITUATION

Cat	When	Good to know
Kitten	From about 8 weeks and 2 lb	Routine at shelters and TNR clinics, as Alley Cat Allies and the ASPCA recommend.
Pet kitten	By 5 months	Before the first heat. A kitten can breed at 4 to 5 months (AAFP).
Female in heat	Possible	Heat can add some risk of bleeding (VCA). Ask your vet whether to go ahead or wait until it passes.
Pregnant cat	Possible, with your vet	Spaying ends the pregnancy. Most clinics that serve community cats spay pregnant cats (ASPCApro).
Nursing mother	Possible	She keeps making milk after surgery. A community cat goes back to her kittens within about a day (Alley Cat Allies).

Cat	When	Good to know
Adult male	Any time	Neutering stops or reduces spraying in about 85% of male cats (VCA).
Older cat	After a vet exam	No set upper age. The vet may run bloodwork first.
Community (feral) cat	When trapped for TNR	Spayed or neutered, vaccinated and ear-tipped at the same visit.

From the AAFP, ASPCA, Alley Cat Allies, ASPCApro and VCA Animal Hospitals. A general guide, not medical advice: your veterinarian decides for each cat.

Why by 5 months: heat comes early

Cats reach puberty young: the Merck Veterinary Manual gives 4 to 12 months. A female in heat rubs against things, rolls on the floor and calls loudly, and some spray urine. VCA describes a heat lasting about a week on average, with the cycle repeating about every three weeks through the breeding season. Cats breed when days are long, roughly January to late fall in the Northern Hemisphere, and indoor cats may cycle all year.

Pregnancy lasts about 60 to 67 days, and a mother cat can come back into heat while still nursing: in a 2023 study of 195 breeding cats, about half did. That is how one unspayed cat ends up with litter after litter.

Can you spay a cat in heat?

Yes. VCA and the ASPCA both say a cat can be spayed while she is in heat, and the Association of Shelter Veterinarians' guidelines treat surgery during heat as safe when the cat's condition allows. VCA notes that heat can increase the risk of bleeding, so ask your vet whether to go ahead or wait the week or so until it passes.

Pregnant and nursing cats

A pregnant cat can be spayed; the surgery ends the pregnancy. Alley Cat Allies presents it as a choice for the caretaker, and ASPCApro reports that most clinics spay pregnant community cats. Talk it through with your vet.

A nursing mother can be spayed too, and she keeps producing milk afterward. For a community cat, clinics speed up her return so she is back with her kittens within about 24 hours. For a pet, ask your vet when to book her once the kittens are eating on their own. Found a mother and kittens outdoors? See [found kittens: what to do first](#).

Neutering males: spraying, roaming and fighting

Much of a tomcat's spraying, roaming and fighting is driven by male hormones, which neutering removes. VCA reports that neutering stops or reduces spraying in about 85% of male cats and roaming in about 90%.

Will a neutered cat still spray? Some do: VCA puts it at about 10% of neutered males and 5% of spayed females. If a fixed cat sprays, talk with your vet: marking can also come from stress or a medical problem.

Health benefits

- Mammary cancer: the Cornell Feline Health Center reports that cats spayed before 6 months had a 91% lower risk of mammary cancer, and those spayed before 1 year an 86% lower risk, in a 2005 study comparing cats with and without the disease.
- Pyometra: spaying removes the uterus, which rules out this life-threatening uterine infection.
- Testicular cancer: neutering prevents it.
- No litters: every cat spayed or neutered means no more kittens born outdoors.

Recovery at home

- Keep your cat indoors and quiet. VCA advises limiting activity for 7 to 10 days; your vet may say up to two weeks.
- Check the incision twice a day. Keep the cone on if the vet sent one, so your cat cannot lick the stitches.
- No baths for 10 days.
- Call the vet for bleeding that won't stop, oozing after the first day, swelling, a bad smell, vomiting, pale gums, or trouble urinating.

Community cats: spay/neuter through TNR

Feral and stray cats are spayed or neutered through trap-neuter-return (TNR): trapped humanely, fixed and vaccinated, then returned home. Alley Cat Allies advises holding males no more than 24 hours after surgery and females no more than 48, in their covered traps, and releasing them once they are fully awake and alert.

While under anesthesia each cat is ear-tipped: the top of the left ear, about 3/8 inch, is removed in a straight line (some programs use the right). It is the universal sign that a cat has been fixed. See

how to trap a feral cat and what TNR is.

Finding low-cost spay/neuter

- Ask your vet, your local shelter or humane society, and local TNR groups about low-cost clinics near you.
- The ASPCA points to the SpayUSA referral network, run by North Shore Animal League America: (800) 248-7729.
- New York's state spay/neuter program is listed as paused, and its funds may not be used for community cats. Details in [TNR and cat feeding laws in New York](#).

Caring for community cats in Cattaraugus County? We help caretakers with spay/neuter costs at local clinics and lend humane traps. Our help is for feral, stray, barn and neighborhood cats. [Apply for help](#).

Quick answers

What is the best age to spay a kitten?

By 5 months, before the first heat, as the AAFP recommends. Shelters and TNR clinics spay from about 8 weeks and 2 pounds. Your vet sets the date.

Can a cat be spayed while in heat?

Yes. Heat can add some risk of bleeding, so ask your vet whether to go ahead or wait about a week until it passes.

Will a neutered cat still spray?

Usually not. VCA reports neutering stops or reduces spraying in about 85% of male cats, though about 10% of neutered males still mark.

Is it too late to spay an older cat?

No set age is too late. Your vet will examine the cat and may run bloodwork before surgery.

How long does a cat take to recover from a spay?

Plan on 7 to 14 days of rest, as your vet advises. Keep the cat indoors and quiet, and check the incision twice a day.

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