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HORMONES ARE RACING: EARLY SPAY & NEUTER CAN PREVENT LATER HEARTACHE

By Diana Webster

Here's a little known cat fact that you can impress your friends with, courtesy of W. Marvin Mackie, DVM, of the Animal Birth Control Clinics in the West L.A. and South Bay Areas; *cat mating is tied to the equinox!* Dr. Mackie says when the days begin to get longer, as they do in January, it signals the female cat's pituitary gland to kick start the ovary into action and the cat goes into heat. With hormones racing around in their furry little bodies like little red Corvettes, the frisky feline will make every conceivable bid for freedom in order to howl and prowl with the first available suitor. Next, after what appears to humans to be a painful mating season (and certainly a vocal one), 62 days later, give or take a few, a new batch of 3 to 6 kittens arrives – whether wanted or not. This is why spring is always kitten season and at no time of the year are litters produced in such large numbers.

This means if a female cat was born in September, she could actually be triggered into heat by the following January, *even though she is only four months old!* Worse yet, she could very well be a “mom” at the tender age of six months – still practically a kitten herself! This isn't the only scenario, though. Cats born during this time of leprechauns and Easter bunnies will remain quiet and nonhormonal throughout the summer and fall, lulling their owners into inaction. This could best be considered the calm before the storm. Since cats don't have a *decisive* age at which they “come into” or “go out of” heat, like dogs do, many owners are caught unaware soon after the new year.

According to Dr. Mackie, this simple process can account for a majority of the unwanted litters of kittens because it takes cat owners, who thought it safe to wait until their kitten was six to seven months of age, by complete surprise. Trying to keep a determined feline breeding machine indoors during the long breeding season (virtually without interruption from January to September) is akin to keeping a teenager under house arrest!

To avoid this family/pet crisis, Dr. Mackie implemented early spay and neuter procedures at his Animal Birth Control Clinics. For the last seven years, the early age surgeries have been successful and well received by the public and Dr. Mackie has found that many of his colleagues will, when asked by the pet owner, do spay/neuter at three to four months of age. These winds of change from old school thinking patterns to the current procedures being practiced today began with an important study conducted in 1987 which concluded that neutering dogs and cats much earlier than the traditional puberty or old age period had no ill effects.

Even the American Veterinary Medical Association has endorsed the concept of early age spaying and neutering for population control. With the result of even more recent successful studies pointing out the advantages of early age neutering, many animal control agencies and humane society shelters have embraced ‘neuter at adoption’ policies. Shelters are now altering both male and female kittens and puppies as early as 8 weeks of age, before they are adopted out, thereby preventing future offspring from further burdening an animal overpopulation problem which is out of control. They are determined to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

That's fine for shelters, but at what age should pet owners bring their puppies and kittens in for altering?

“I like to key the spay or neuter to their all-important vaccination program, which, if they begin it on schedule, would make the pet four months old when completed. If the pet has not had any vaccinations by the age of four months, then we go ahead with the surgery and begin the vaccination series immediately,” says Dr. Mackie. “By altering at this age, the pet's puberty and reproductive wake-up call, along with the resultant stress, is avoided.”

Early spaying and neutering is also a boon to conscientious breeders who do not want the puppies or kittens they sell to be bred later on by the buyer. This is where spaying and neutering at eight weeks of age comes in. “any time you have compelling reasons to alter an animal early, whether it’s for a breeder, a batch of kittens from a wild or stray mother that you probably won’t be able to catch later on, or from someone rescuing and adopting out youngsters who want to ensure that they won’t someday reproduce, I see no harm at all in doing the surgery at this age,” says the doctor.

In addition to running his two clinics, Dr. Mackie is active in public education, public speaking, and educational videos. Interested pet owners as well as colleagues can send in \$12 and receive his information video on early spay and neuter procedures (mail to Animal Birth Control, 450 Arcadia Drive, San Pedro, CA 90731)