

FACTSHEET

Cat welfare

Cats make wonderful pets – almost a third of Australian households have a pet cat or cats, and most consider them as part of the family. Pet cats are good for us too – as well as providing companionship, research shows they help us to have better physical and mental health, and they make us happy.

Whether you have decided to feed and befriend a stray cat, adopted from a shelter or chosen your cat from a breeder, you need to ensure your cat is desexed (sterilised). Desexing your cat prevents feline overpopulation and it is good for your cat and the environment.

What age should a cat be desexed?

For maximum health and social benefits, all kittens should be desexed before they reach sexual maturity (12-16 weeks/3 -4 months). However, it is never too late to prevent unwanted kittens by desexing adult cats.

Kittens can be safely desexed from 8-10 weeks of age (by the time they weigh 1 kilogram). Early-age desexing prevents the development of antisocial behaviours associated with sexual maturity as well as guaranteeing no unwanted kittens.

There is absolutely *no truth* to the old myth that female cats should be allowed to have one litter of kittens before being desexed. In fact, having a litter increases their risk of cancer.

Undesexed ('entire') male cats are much more likely to exhibit unwanted behaviours such as spraying pungent-smelling urine (including inside the house), wandering and getting into fights with other cats. They can also be more aggressive with people and are generally less affectionate than desexed males.

Undesexed cats are at higher risk of injury, being run over, and potentially fatal diseases such as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus and Feline Leukaemia Virus. Desexing reduces the risk of many types of cancer in both male and female cats.

Desexing makes cats healthier, happier, less likely to wander: in short, desexed cats make better pets.

What is involved?

There are no known long-term risks associated with desexing or early-age desexing. Early-age desexing has been practised for more than 20 years and has been found to be medically and behaviourally safe for cats.

Female desexing (also called spaying/speying) involves the surgical removal of the ovaries and uterus (through a small incision on the side or on the belly) while the cat is under general anaesthetic. After surgery, the cat will need to rest and should be kept indoors and quiet for the next few days. You should keep an eye on the incision scar and contact your vet if the scar appears to be swollen, weeping or bleeding. You will also need to know what type of stitches have been used and make sure your cat does not pull at them.

Male desexing (also called neutering) is also carried out under general anaesthetic and involves the removal of the testes through a small incision in the scrotum. There are no stitches. After surgery, the cat should be kept indoors and quiet for a few days.

Most male and female cats and kittens recover very quickly from desexing. Your vet will give you post-operative care instructions. Make sure your cat has plenty of fresh water to drink and offer them their favourite foods. Observe them closely and if your cat appears listless and doesn't have their normal appetite back within 24 hours you should contact your vet.

Benefits

The benefits of desexing – no unwanted kittens; preventing the development of antisocial behaviours; and reducing the risks of a number of diseases – far outweigh the risks.

Tragically, in NSW every year thousands of cats are euthanased (killed) in pounds and shelters because there are too many cats and kittens and not enough homes. You can help to stop this by ensuring your cat is desexed.

Different vet clinics charge different prices for desexing, varying from about \$120 to about \$300. **If you need assistance with accessing affordable desexing, Cat Protection can help you.** If you don't speak English, please ask an English-speaking friend or relative to call our office (9am-4pm, Monday to Friday, 9519 7201) and we can find a clinic or program that will provide you with discounted desexing for your cat.

What is microchipping and registration?

A microchip is the size of a grain of rice and contains a barcode which can be 'read' by a small hand-held device called a microchip scanner. A microchip is not a location or tracking device. It is implanted under the skin near the shoulders. The numbers from the microchip barcode are entered onto a database, the NSW Companion Animals Register and when you register your cat, your address and contact details are then linked to that microchip number.

This means if your cat is lost and is taken to a pound or shelter, the staff there can use a scanner to 'read' your cat's microchip number. When they look up that number in the Companion Animals Register they will see your contact details and will contact you to let you know your cat is with them.

Your information is confidential and only authorised staff at councils, pounds, shelters and vet clinics can see it.

Microchipping and registering your pets is required by NSW law. It is significantly cheaper to register a cat desexed before four-months of age. For further information contact your local council or visit <https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/public/dogs-cats/>

It's important to keep your contact details up-to-date so you can be reunited with your cat if they are ever lost. You can update your phone and address by creating your own account with the NSW Pet Registry or by contacting your local council.

What medicine should my cat have?

All kittens should have their full course of F3 vaccinations and after that, boosters every one to three years, depending on your vet's advice. The F3 is known as a 'core' vaccine and it provides protection against Feline Panleukopaenia Virus, Feline Calicivirus and Feline Herpes Virus.

Your cat needs to be regularly treated to prevent parasites (fleas and worms). Never use products designed for dogs on your cat – these could kill your cat. Fleas and worms can cause serious health problems for your cat as well as issues for any other pets and people in your household.

If your cat shows signs of illness (for example, loss of appetite or excessive thirst) or injury (for example, flinching when touched) or changed behaviours (such as hiding if they don't normally do this) you should take them to the vet. Even when your cat is healthy, you should take them to the vet once a year for a check-up: remember, 12 months is a long time in a cat's lifespan.

Nutrition and lifestyle

All cats need a good diet, plenty of fresh water (placed in bowls away from where their food is served), a clean litter tray and somewhere safe and comfortable to sleep. They also benefit from playtime – this helps to keep them mentally and physically healthy. You don't have to spend a lot of money – cats love cardboard boxes, chasing scrunched up paper and you can make food puzzles for them by putting your cat's biscuits in a cardboard tube (such as an empty toilet paper roll). Cats benefit from high places to perch – vertical space is important to cats – and they all need somewhere to stretch and work their claws, such as a sturdy scratching pole.

When buying cat food, make sure the label says "nutritionally complete and balanced" – cats have very particular dietary needs and can get very sick if they do not get all the vitamins and minerals they need. Dog food cannot substitute for cat food. Some cat food is labelled 'complementary' – this should be given only occasionally as a treat as it does not meet your cat's nutritional requirements.

If your cat is not exclusively indoors, try to contain them to your property by cat-proofing your fence. For the sake of your cat's health and safety, neighbourhood amenity and wildlife protection *always* keep your cat securely indoors overnight.