

Why it's important to spay or neuter your pet

By Lisa Bloch

I know it's not polite to stare but ever since I started working in animal welfare, I can't help but notice when male dogs and cats aren't neutered. The evidence is just so ... prominent. But aside from how these dangly bits might look, it's always surprising to me that in this day and age, some people still don't want to spay or neuter their pets.

Don't get me wrong, the thought of having a beloved pet's offspring to love when that pet is gone is tempting. We often romanticize the notion that their puppies or kittens will be just like their parent whom we adored — but they won't. Animals are all individuals, just like us.

Lack of spay/neuter is the single biggest contributing factor in the cause of unwanted pets. Pets in shelters across the United States face euthanasia simply because of pet overpopulation. That's why at Marin Humane, cats, dogs, and bunnies are all altered, as we call it, before they go to their forever homes. We want to end the cycle of breeding unwanted or neglected pets that fill our nation's shelters.

Beyond preventing more unwanted pets, however, is the fact that there are many benefits — to the animal, to their guardian and to the community.

First, neutering male dogs and cats eliminates the urge to seek out females in heat, which means fewer pets will try to escape a house or yard.

There's a cute dog that I've encountered alone on a nearby trail and helped reunite with his guardian three times. Each time, the guardian mentions his dog "likes to wander" and "always finds a way out of the yard." And each time, I gently remind him that if he has his dog neutered, he'll be much less likely to do this. So far, I haven't had success in convincing him, and I continue to worry his dog will get hit by a car, get attacked by another dog, or simply stay lost.

Neutering and spaying also dramatically help in preventing or decreasing behavior issues. Unneutered male animals are much more likely to be aggressive toward other unneutered males, based on perceived competition for females.

Second, neutering also greatly reduces the urge in both dogs and cats to mark their territory by urinating in unwanted places — like inside our homes (ugh).

Sometimes when I do my "gentle suggesting" to people who haven't had their animal neutered, they reply that they worry their pet will "feel less male" or be less protective.

Pets don't have any concept of sexual identity or ego, and neutering doesn't change their personality. In addition, it's a dog's natural instinct to protect their home and family. A dog's personality is formed more by genetics and environment than by sex hormones.

Third, spaying or neutering also keeps animals healthy by reducing or eliminating the possibility of uterine infection, mammary tumors, prostate problems, and certain types of cancers.

Having female animals go through pregnancy and birth is also inherently risky, so unless you are completely educated and prepared to care for them and all their offspring, we must ask ourselves if putting them through that is truly being a kind and caring guardian.

As the saying goes, prevent a litter and fix your critter.

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director for Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions and stories about the people and animals in our community. Go to marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.