



Living with an Intact Female Cat

The NHSPCA normally requires that all cats and dogs receive spay or neuter surgery prior to adoption. However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, veterinarians in some communities have stopped offering elective surgical services, including spay/neuter. Therefore, it has become necessary to adopt animals out before they have been spayed or neutered and plan to proceed with the spay or neuter surgery when our services become available again. Living with an intact (not spayed or neutered) cat can present some challenges, outlined below. It may take several months for normal spay/neuter services to resume in our community, so adopters need to be prepared for the possibility of living with an intact animal for months. Cat overpopulation is still an animal welfare concern, so you will need to follow up with your veterinarian to schedule an appointment for spay or neuter for your pet as soon as possible.

Age and Time of Sexual Maturity

Cats reach sexual maturity between 5-9 months of age, which is when you may start to notice hormonally-driven behavior problems. This is also when you need to take steps to prevent unwanted pregnancies. As the first heat can occur earlier in some cases, we recommend keeping intact male and female kittens separated from each other starting at ~4 months of age.

Special Considerations for Living with an Intact Female Cat

No Outdoor Access!

It is important to keep intact female cats strictly indoors, unless you have an outdoor enclosure such as a catio, or if they are trained to walk on a harness and leash. Intact cats with outdoor access are at a significantly high risk of unwanted pregnancy, fighting with other cats, and becoming lost due to roaming behavior.

No Contact Between Intact Males and Females

It is impossible to keep intact males and female cats in the same home without a high risk of unwanted pregnancy. When female cats come into heat, intact males can become very forceful in their attempts to reach and mate females. Heat cycles are not always obvious, and female cats can be fertile before signs of heat are noticeable to owners. This complicates management strategies for keeping intact male and female cats apart during heat.

Urine Marking

Urine marking is not common in female cats, but it is more likely to occur with female cats who are not spayed. Unlike male cats, female urine marking typically occurs with squatting, and may be distributed on vertical or horizontal surfaces. It is characterized by small, frequent depositions of urine in socially significant areas. Urine marking in females is more common when they are coming into or going through a heat cycle (see below). Urine marked areas should be cleaned with an enzymatic cleaner per package

instructions. Keep multiple (number of cats in the house + 1) litter boxes in the home, clean them daily, and use non-scented, clumping clay litter. Spread litter boxes out so there is one in every part of the home. Spaying is the most effective treatment for urine marking – over 95% of female cats will stop problematic urine marking when spayed.

Heat Cycles

Several times a year, intact female cats will have a heat cycle. The first sign you will probably notice is a behavior change – the cat is suddenly friendlier and showing more attention-seeking behavior. When petting the cat, she may present her rear end and tread her feet. She may also roll around on the ground more and engage in more marking behavior with her cheek glands (bunting), or urine marking (see above). Some cats also vocalize more, making an unusual ‘yowling noise’, especially at night. She may act restless and show a decreased interest in food. The ‘in heat’ period can last a variable amount of time, from 4-20 days. Intact male cats may be attracted to your home during this period.