

Living with an Intact Female Cat

The BC SPCA normally requires that all cats, dogs, and rabbits 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 allow owners to take them in for spay/neuter when regular vet services resume in their communities.

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 a very serious animal welfare concern in BC, so please take the earliest opportunity to have your new cat spayed when elective vet services are available again.

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 behaviour 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 high risk of unwanted pregnancy, fighting with other cats, and becoming lost due to roaming behaviour.

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 (multiple brands, available for purchase online or in pet supply stores) 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.

If your cat is producing more urine than usual, if urine has a pink or red colour, or if they seem to be stressed or in pain when urinating, there could be something medical going on. Contact your veterinarian.

Heat Cycles

Several times a year, intact female cats will have a heat cycle. The first sign you will probably notice is a behaviour change – the cat is suddenly more friendly and showing more attention-seeking behaviour. 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 behaviour 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.

Pregnancy

In rare cases, it is possible that an intact female cat may have been adopted while pregnant. This could happen if a cat comes into SPCA care in the early stages of pregnancy before it can be detected. If the BC SPCA knows or suspects that a pet may be pregnant, this will be discussed with adopters prior to adoption. In cats, pregnancy lasts 58-67 days, and kittens should stay with their mothers for at least 8 weeks after birth. If you suspect your adopted pet may be unexpectedly pregnant, please contact the SPCA branch for support.

For more information, please visit: <https://spca.bc.ca/faqs/%E2%80%8Bhow-will-spaying-or-neutering-help-my-pet/>