

Fostering or Adopting an Intact Female Cat

The ASPCA normally requires that all cats and dogs receive routine 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 consider adoption of some 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 as 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, so please take the earliest opportunity to have your new cat spayed when elective veterinary services become available again.

Age and Time of Sexual Maturity

Female cats can reach sexual maturity as early as 4 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. However, continued socialization with other cats is critical for proper development of social behavior so, if you intend for your cat to live with other cats, it's important that you continue to socialize her, preferably with spayed females and neutered males, to minimize potential problems.

Cats are seasonally polyestrous, meaning that they come into heat multiple times during the breeding season. The breeding season begins in January and continues through late fall but the exact timing will vary according to factors such as temperature and the number of daylight hours. Indoor cats may cycle all year round.

Each heat lasts approximately 4-20 days but if the cat does not mate during that time, she will come back into heat again a week or two later. This will continue throughout the breeding season. The most obvious signs of a cat in heat is that she will become very affectionate, even obnoxiously demanding. She'll roll around on the floor and persistently rub against people, other animals or even furniture. She'll yowl in an effort to attract feline suitors, especially at night. When stroked along the back, she will present and raise her rear end and tread with her hind legs. She may become restless and show a decreased interest in food. If she is unable to settle, you may want to block her from your bedroom at night and play relaxing music or white noise to block out the sound of her courtship songs.

Special Considerations for Living with an Intact Female Cat

Because female cats cycle in and out of heat every few days or weeks, it can be particularly challenging to live with an intact female cat. If your cat is driving you crazy, speak with your veterinarian about the

possibility of temporarily suppressing her heat with medication (megestrol acetate) until you can have her spayed. [See this statement for more information.](#)

No Outdoor Access

Intact cats with outdoor access are at high risk of unwanted pregnancy. It is important to keep intact female cats strictly indoors, unless you have an outdoor enclosure such as a catio or enclosed terrace or porch. If your female cat has access to outdoors, even via open windows in your home, you may find a congregation of lovestruck tomcats hanging around your house, urine marking, and otherwise trying to woo her to come outside.

Urine Marking

Urine marking and spraying is not common in female cats, but it is more likely to occur with female cats who are in heat. Unlike male cats, females typically mark by squatting and depositing small, frequent deposits on vertical or horizontal surfaces. The urine contains both hormones and pheromones that serve to advertise her reproductive status to intact males.

Urine marked areas should be cleaned with an enzymatic cleaner (multiple brands, available for purchase online or in pet supply stores) per package instructions.

To discourage urine marking, make sure to have multiple litter boxes available in various locations throughout your home. The ideal number of litter boxes is one for each cat plus an extra. Clean each box daily and use non-scented litter. Most cats prefer clumping litter but you may want to experiment with offering a choice of litters to see which type your cats prefer.

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

Monitoring for pyometra

Intact female cats can develop a life-threatening infection of the uterus called pyometra. Signs of this include reduced energy, not wanting to eat, fever, drinking a lot of water, and discharge of pus visible under the tail or on bedding. Affected cats may have some or all of these symptoms. If you notice any of these, contact your veterinarian immediately.

No Contact Between Intact Males and Females

It can be challenging to keep intact males and females together in the same home because of the risk of an unwanted pregnancy. When female cats come into heat, intact males can become very forceful in their attempts to reach and mate females. Furthermore, heat cycles are not always obvious, and female cats can be fertile before signs of heat are noticeable to owners. A successful breeding can happen very quickly so it's best to make sure that there is complete separation of intact male and female cats within the same household.

For more information, please visit <https://www.aspcapro.org/covid19sn>