

Sterilization of Female Cats

Ronald M. Bright, DVM, MS, DACVS

Purpose of Procedure

Elective sterilization is done primarily to prevent estrus (heat) cycles and unwanted pregnancies and offspring. This goal is accomplished by removing the ovaries, alone or in combination with removal of the uterus.

Ovariohysterectomy is the treatment of choice for uterine diseases, including pyometra (uterine infection), metritis, cystic changes of the uterus, rupture of the uterus, and tumors of the uterus. Vaginal prolapse, uterine prolapse, and some hormonal (endocrine) problems, such as diabetes mellitus, may benefit from a sterilization procedure.

Pregnancy termination is another indication for removal of the ovaries and uterus. Owners of some cats elect to have their queen sterilized at the time of a caesarean section.

Description of Technique

Ovariectomy (OVE) is removal of the ovaries. Ovariohysterectomy (OVH, OHE) is removal of both the uterus and ovaries and is commonly referred to as a *spay* operation.

An appropriate preoperative evaluation that includes a physical examination and blood tests is usually recommended, even for elective procedures. Comprehensive laboratory tests are advisable in older cats to detect any problems that may present a risk for anesthesia and surgery. Other preoperative testing depends on the presence of underlying diseases.

The conventional manner of performing a sterilization procedure requires an incision into the abdomen that is long enough to allow the reproductive organs to be found. The incision is significantly longer for removal of a diseased or enlarged uterus, compared with a healthy, nonpregnant uterus. Rarely, a veterinarian may recommend making incisions on both flanks (behind the last rib) when performing an OVE.

Preparation of Animal

Your veterinarian will instruct you to withhold food and sometimes water for a certain period of time, depending on the anesthesia to be used for the surgery.

Potential Complications

Most cats do well after surgery, with no or minimal complications.

- Minor complications include licking at the incision, development of inflammation or a small pocket of fluid (seroma) beneath the skin at the incision, and premature loss of external skin sutures.
- Hemorrhage after surgery is more common in larger, obese cats and is more of a concern if it originates from the uterine vessels.
- As is possible with all abdominal incisions, a breakdown of the abdominal wall with herniation of abdominal contents can occur, albeit rarely.
- Delayed complications of removing only the ovaries include a return of heat cycles and infection of the uterus (pyometra), especially if removal of ovarian tissue was incomplete.
- If the ovaries and the uterus were both removed, the small portion of the uterus left behind may become infected at a later date. This complication is referred to as *stump pyometra*, and it is sometimes associated with incomplete removal of ovarian tissue at the time of the original sterilization procedure.

Postoperative/Follow-up Care

In many instances, the sterilization procedure is uncomplicated and the cat may be discharged from the veterinary hospital on the same day, often with appropriate pain management. When an OVH is performed in cats at risk for bleeding or with serious underlying uterine disease, continued hospitalization may be recommended so the animal can be monitored and appropriate therapy delivered.

The cat should be kept quiet for 10-14 days or longer, according to your veterinarian's instructions. Limiting the animal's activity (no running, rough playing, or jumping) helps minimize the chance of breakdown of the abdominal incision. If possible, the cat should be kept inside in a clean, dry environment until the incisions have healed.

No recheck visits may be needed if external sutures were not used. In other cases, recheck visits are scheduled based on the reason for the sterilization procedure. Notify your veterinarian if any bleeding or persistent oozing occurs at the incision, if the cat continues to lick or traumatize the incision, if any swelling develops under the incision, or if the incision starts to open.