Understanding Feline Rescue’s Spay/Neuter Policy for Kittens

In March, foster caregivers participated in a survey about implementing an updated spay/neuter policy for Feline Rescue kittens. With board approval, this policy is now in effect. Read on to better understand what this change entails and to address questions you may have.

Policy Statement

Feline Rescue has adopted the following policy for the spay or neuter of kittens:

Feline Rescue supports efforts to reduce pet overpopulation and unnecessary euthanasia by spaying or neutering all cats and kittens prior to adoption. In keeping with the general standards of the animal welfare community and the recommendations of the veterinary community at large, Feline Rescue will perform spays or neuters on kittens as young as 8 weeks old who also weigh at least 2 lbs. Research has shown that kittens can be safely spayed or neutered at this age and that younger animals have shorter surgery times, faster recovery from anesthesia, fewer surgical complications, and faster healing compared to older animals. As with all medical and surgical procedures, spaying or neutering will only be carried out on cats and kittens when deemed appropriate by their attending veterinarian.

The corollary to this change in policy also means that kittens can go to their forever homes earlier once they have recovered from their spay/neuter surgery.

- Our prior policy was to wait for surgery until the kittens were at least 12 weeks old and weighed at least three pounds. However, that policy was established 20 years ago, and since then, scientific research has revealed that pediatric spay and neuter is not just safe, it is safer than waiting to perform surgery until a kitten is older and weighs more. A study that analyzed the thousands of pediatric spay and neuter surgeries done across the country over the past several decades showed decreased risks of surgical and post-surgical complications from pediatric spays and neuters compared to the same procedures in older animals.
- Veterinarians who perform pediatric spay and neuter report that it is an easier and faster to do, reducing the amount of time the animal spends under anesthesia.
- Pediatric surgical patients recover more quickly after anesthesia and heal faster than older animals.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q-1 Why are we changing our policy?

Spaying and neutering our kittens at an earlier age will allow us to adopt them out to their forever homes sooner. This will allow them to bond sooner and more closely with their adoptive families while creating space in our foster program to help even more mothers and kittens. In addition, as stated above, surgery at 8 weeks and 2 pounds is in the best interests of our kittens because it is safe and the kittens will recover and heal more quickly than from surgery done later in life.

Q-2 Does this mean that all kittens will be spayed or neutered at 8 weeks?

No. Each kitten will be evaluated by a veterinarian prior to surgery to ensure that they are healthy enough to undergo the procedure. Kittens who are underweight or have health concerns that could make surgery more dangerous will only undergo their spay or neuter when it is medically appropriate.
Q-3  *The policy change means that kittens can be adopted out at eight weeks old. Why would we allow kittens to leave our care that young?*

There are several reasons:

- Mother cats generally begin to wean their kittens onto solid foods starting around 4 weeks-old. It is also natural for the weaning process to take approximately 4 weeks total, meaning that kittens 8 weeks-old and older have no need for formula or their mother’s milk.
- Studies have shown that weaning kittens at 8 weeks-old has no impact on their emotional or social development compared to weaning them at 12 weeks-old.
- Most feral mothers wean their kittens between 6 to 8 weeks-old so that they can leave them longer and more often to hunt. For that reason, kittens adopted out at 8 weeks-old can be left for longer periods of time, such as overnight or during the work day.
- Many adopters are eager to bring their kittens home and experience the silliest, most fun ages. Allowing kittens to go home at 8 weeks-old allows this to happen and may help them bond more closely with their adopters.
- Perhaps most importantly, adopting out kittens at a younger age will allow us the space and resources to save more kittens overall.

Q-4  *Shouldn’t kittens stay with their mama cats?*

A kitten’s critical socialization period, i.e. the time when it learns what is normal, what is scary, and how to behavior like a cat, is between 2-8 weeks-old. It is important that, whenever possible, kittens spend this time with their litter mates and their mother. However, their secondary socialization period, which includes learning what to expect from their environment and other animals they encounter (including people,) is between 9-16 weeks-old. It is best to allow a kitten to transition into its adoptive home early in this developmental stage so that it can accept its new environment and family more readily.

Q-5  *Foster caregivers are supposed to socialize the kittens. How can they get them ready at eight weeks?*

All aspects of socialization that a kitten should undergo after 8 weeks-old can be accomplished in an adopter’s home. By educating our adopters well we can ensure that they know the proper ways to acclimate their new kittens to handling, sounds, animals, and unfamiliar people. Educating adopters to prepare them for life with their new kittens has always been our responsibility, and that will be no different now that we will adopt out kittens at 8 weeks-old instead of 12 weeks-old.

Q-6  *Will the kitten be able to receive all shots before leaving our care?*

Kittens will receive vaccines appropriate for their age and health status throughout their stay in foster care. After adoption, providing age-appropriate vaccines and care for kittens becomes the responsibility of their new owners. It is up to the adopter to consult with their family veterinarian to determine what vaccines and other preventive care are appropriate for the kitten in its new home environment. Many veterinary clinics offer free first-time visits for cats adopted from a rescue group, and we provide low-cost veterinary clinic information upon request.
Q-7  **What if there is a medical emergency with the kittens once they are adopted?**

Medical emergencies following adoption can always be a concern, regardless of the age of the cat adopted. Adopters are responsible for the medical care of cats after they are adopted.

Q-8  **If the kittens aren’t immediately adopted, are they transferred to the shelter?**

Kittens become eligible to transfer to the shelter program at 4-months of age. Transfer decisions are made at the discretion of the Shelter Coordinator, Foster Coordinator, and Cat Movement Manager in accordance with the best interest of the cat. Kittens under 4-months of age are not eligible to be in the shelter.

Q-9  **Isn’t the change in policy just an effort to save money or increase our statistics?**

This policy change not only allows us to help more kittens per year, it also helps each individual kitten by reducing the pain and healing time they experience after surgery, by allowing them to transition to their new home when they are at an emotionally resilient stage in their development, and by providing the opportunity for the kitten’s adopters to form a strong bond with them in the early weeks of their life. Any money we save as a result of this policy will be spent helping more kittens per year, saving more lives. If we assume a foster will always have kittens coming in to the foster program, with a 12 week stay, the foster will be able to manage care for four sets of kittens. If the time in foster is reduced to 8 weeks, that same foster caregiver can manage care for six sets of kittens. This policy change is a great step toward our goal of helping as many stray, abandoned, and abused cats as possible while decreasing the number of unwanted cats overall through spaying and neutering.

**Conclusion**

The decision to change Feline Rescue’s minimum requirements for age and weight before a kitten can be spayed or neutered was made based on the evidence that it is a beneficial policy to the kittens individually and for our organization’s ability to help cats overall. This change brings us in line with recommendations by authorities on animal health, welfare, and development including the Association of Shelter Veterinarians, the American Animal Hospital Association, the American Veterinary Medical Association, most major animal welfare organizations, and respected public figures including The Kitten Lady and Jackson Galaxy. This decision was made thoughtfully and with good reason, and as always, each individual cat’s health and welfare will guide how our veterinary care policies apply to them.