

The Benefits of Spaying and Neutering

by Kathleen Dillon

The question of whether to spay or neuter your dog is one that all responsible dog owners need to consider. This article is not meant to usurp the advice of your personal veterinarian, nor to dispense veterinarian advice, but rather discuss questions we've all had and to pass on information gleaned from various veterinarian sources. There are several reasons people use for not altering their dog, but the simple fact is that spaying or neutering greatly increases the lifespan of your dog and increases its quality of life as well. It can also greatly simplify your life.

Another very important and overlooked factor is the age at which you have your dog spayed or neutered since there is evidence that altering your dog early can lead to increased chances of many things including hip dysplasia, CCL (ACL problems), allergies, cancers and many other health concerns. There are also other items of concern voiced by many regarding other effects of neutering at an early age such as narrow chests, thinner heads, less muscling. It's a common practice of many veterinarians to push altering dogs very early. Even though your local veterinarian may recommend spaying or neutering your dog at 6 months or even earlier, there are other veterinarians who recommend waiting until the dog is 14 months due to the adverse effects, especially for working breeds, of early altering. At the end of this article there are a couple of links that will present the information about the disadvantages and health risks of early spay/neuter procedures.

Of interest to note about spaying or neutering is that dogs altered early, before the growth plates are closed, grow larger than they would have otherwise. In a study done on dogs that had been neutered at 7 weeks and 7 months of age compared to intact dogs, the dogs neutered at 7 weeks had the latest closure of their growth plates and grew to the largest size. The dogs that were neutered at 7 months of age were larger than the intact dogs but not as large as those neutered at 7 weeks.

Spaying eliminates the heat cycle, which can be accompanied by mood swings, marking and undesirable behaviors and are always associated with messy spotting and the attraction of every available male within a mile or more radius to your yard. In male dogs it eliminates roaming to seek out females in heat, thereby also eliminating the possibility of being hit by cars or fighting with other suitors while engaging in such behavior. It is well known that male dogs can detect a female dog in heat at an amazing distance of two miles or even more. So just because your dog is a house dog and not allowed to freely roam does not mean that he doesn't know that your neighbor's female dog six blocks away is ready for him to come calling!

A major benefit of spaying/neutering to a sporting dog owner is that when it's hunting season the only thing your dog is going to be interested in is you and the hunt. Heats can begin in females as young as six months of age. Females cycle twice a year, as a general rule, approximately every six months and the heat cycle lasts three weeks. However, younger females can be irregular and some females are always irregular. The heat cycle begins "silently" so you may not notice that she's begun her heat cycle, but there won't be a male dog in your hunting party that will have his mind on birds when you and your buddies venture out. The neutered male will shine on such an outing while all the other dogs, the female included, put forth a less than desirable performance for reasons that may only be known to them! The odds are great that an intact female will cycle during bird season and you'll have to leave her behind with mom, and mom will be the one dealing with the spotting, restlessness and confinement necessary.

A myth that seems to be endlessly passed about is that a female should have at least one litter before being spayed. There is absolutely no basis for this reasoning, no benefits to reap from exposing your female to the inherent risks of motherhood, and this is the worst possible reason to step into the world of breeding. Casual breeding is detrimental in a myriad of ways, and even though you feel your female is of breeding quality (all health checks done, within breed standard, correct temperament and a great gun dog) and you know of a stud that also meets all those requirements, do you really want to expose her to the risks that are involved with pregnancy and whelping? Reference the article "Before You Breed" in an earlier club publication (also on the website) for more

about considerations before breeding.

Spaying is major surgery and a factor to be weighed is that there is always a risk, though minimal, of death presented with surgery and anesthesia. Possible disadvantages of spaying female dogs include a slight increase in aggressive tendencies in some females due to increased testosterone levels and an increased risk of urinary incontinence, which is treatable but is sometimes life-long. Many owners find that the reduction of "marking" is enough of a benefit to warrant neutering their males. Other benefits include decreased aggression in about one third of the dogs who express this behavior.

Studies do show that increased weight gain during growth can cause problems with hip dysplasia. Dogs with weight gain that exceeded breed standards had a higher frequency and more severe CHD than dogs with weight gain below breed standards. So by combining the increased risk of weight gain and orthopedic studies some risk is possible. Weight gain above what would occur with normal maturity is experienced in about 10% of altered dogs. It is important to control weight gain in all growing dogs, but especially in those that are neutered/spayed and show an increased tendency towards weight gain.

There are positive health benefits to altering your dog. Taking into consideration all aspects, the positive aspects of spaying/neutering far outweigh the minimal risks involved or the possible disadvantages, and it's an investment in a longer, better life for man's best friend. But the disadvantages and health risks posed by spaying or neutering too young, prior to the full growth of the dog, seem to substantially justify waiting to alter your sporting dog until the age of 14 months.

<http://www.naiaonline.org/pdfs/LongTermHealthEffectsOfSpayNeuterInDogs.pdf>

<http://www.caninesports.com/SpayNeuter.html>

1Salmeri, et al: AAVMA Journal 4-1-01;

2Kealy RD, et al; Effect of Limited Food Consumption on the Incidence of Hip Dysplasia in Growing Dogs, JAVMA 201:857-863,1992. Hedhammer A et al: Over-nutrition & Skeletal Disease, Cornell Vol. 4,11-60, 1974. Alexander JE, Wood LL; Time-Restricted versus Free-Choice Feeding, Companion Animal 14(2): 41-47-1987. Smith C., Right From the Start, AKC Puppies2000.

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References: Veterinary Guide for Animal Owners, CE Spalding DVM, Vetinfo Digest, Dog Owners Veterinary Handbook, D. Carlson DVM, J Geffin MD.