

To Spay or Not to Spay Your Dog?

The positives and negatives of spaying dogs.

Jon Geller, DVM

Q. I had a question regarding my 2-year-old female Boxer. Originally, my husband and I had planned on breeding her, but we have relocated across the country and no longer want to do so.

She has already had two heat cycles. We were going to spay her, but are unsure due to some new information. Our veterinarian told us that Boxers and German Shepherd Dogs that are spayed, after their first heat cycle have a 50 percent chance of being permanently incontinent. I was hoping to gather some further information before making such an important decision. If you could give me your input or help me gather some more resources on this topic I would really appreciate it.

A. You have somewhat of a dilemma. Yes, I agree if you spay your boxer, there is a good chance she may be somewhat incontinent and will occasionally leak urine. On the other hand, if you do not spay her, there is a real possibility that she will get mammary cancer (the dog equivalent of breast cancer) or a uterine infection when she gets older.

Estrogen has a protective effect against the cells that cause breast cancer, and also helps with maintaining the tone of the urethral sphincter, which prevents unintended urinary leakage in dogs. When a dog is spayed, the uterus and ovaries are removed and the source of estrogen is gone.

Actually, I don't think this is a real dilemma. Urinary leakage is, at worst, inconvenient, and can be well controlled with medication. Mammary cancer and pyometra (uterine infection) are both life-threatening conditions that require extensive, expensive surgical and medical care. Therefore, I highly suggest you have your Boxer spayed.

Urinary continence is easily controlled in spayed female dogs by giving them phenylpropanolamine, a drug that, like estrogen, increases the tone of the urethral sphincter. PPA used to be an ingredient in a human weight-loss supplement, but has been pulled off the market due to possible side effects on the heart. In dogs, PPA has not had any of these side effects. It can be given in a controlled release form, often only every other day, and is not particularly expensive.

On the plus side, your boxer may not have any problems with incontinence for a long time, and your decision to spay her can help head off major health problems in the future.

Best,
Jon Geller, DVM

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