

## Early Spay May Lead to Incontinent Older Dog

**Leave puppy with rescue for later spay surgery.**

*By Jon Geller, DVM*

Q. I am adopting an 8-week-old rescue Chihuahua. The rescue won't release her until she is spayed. I have read that females should not be spayed until at least 4 months of age because they can suffer life-long urinary and bladder-control problems. I told them I would show proof of spaying when she is old enough and use any vet they would like, but the answer was still "no." Should I be concerned or am I making too much of this? I want what best for my puppy.

A. There is ongoing debate in the veterinary world regarding any long-term side effects from spaying or neutering at a very young age. Although it is true that such spaying and neutering allows shelters to adopt puppies out at a younger age and the surgery is much easier to perform, there is evidence of problems that may be increased in dogs who have the surgery before 4 to 6 months of age.

The main problem reported is in female dogs who may have increased urinary incontinence later in life due to the early surgery and resulting change in normal hormonal development. Obesity has also been linked to early spay-neuter, but this is more of a lifestyle issue.

In both sexes of dogs, it is possible that there is a higher incidence of injury to the cranial cruciate ligament of the knee, the most common orthopedic injury in dogs. Early spay-neuter may interrupt the normal hormonal stimulation needed for these ligaments to develop fully.

The consensus is to spay or neuter at 5 to 6 months of age when possible, and always before the first heat cycle in females (around 6 months). Male dogs should also be neutered by 8 months of age when possible to minimize hormonally controlled behavioral issues such as wandering and aggression. This becomes a much more significant surgery in regards to anesthesia, bleeding and pain management, and will cost significantly more than surgery in a very young puppy.

In shelter situations, the benefits of early spay-neuter may outweigh the downsides (i.e. dogs that get adopted out, but never get sterilized, and continue to reproduce). I recommend asking the rescue to keep the dog for another month or two before doing the spay surgery, then taking her home.