

Spay and Neuter Facts

Learn the facts about spay and neutering dogs.

It's a scary thing to send a young pup in for elective surgery. Most people have heard stories about simple surgeries gone wrong or may even have experienced the loss of a pet in childhood that was attributed to surgical mishap.

Fortunately for dogs today, improvements in anesthesia and monitoring equipment make surgery safer than ever. The use of gas anesthetics; a better understanding of how to use pain medications before, during and after surgery; and increased and better monitoring by veterinary technicians have brought striking increases in surgical safety.

Pre-anesthetic blood testing is becoming standard practice, particularly for spaying, which is a longer, more involved surgery than neutering (except when one or both testicles are retained inside the body). It's not necessary to run a full blood panel and complete blood count. A simple test that includes blood urea nitrogen levels, total blood protein and a hematocrit (the ratio of packed red blood cells to whole blood) is adequate for a young, healthy dog, says Deb Eldredge, D.V.M., of Burrstone Animal Hospital.

Keep in mind, however, that normal bloodwork doesn't mean your dog won't have a problem with anesthesia, says Christine Wilford, D.V.M. "When it comes to anesthesia, the most important part of the animal is the heart and lungs, and bloodwork isn't going to tell you anything about those." What's most important, she says, is that the puppy doesn't have a heart murmur and doesn't have any pre-existing diseases that are going untreated.

"I'm not against pre-anesthetic bloodwork," Wilford says, "but I don't like the implication that when the results are normal your animal is going to be safe. The safety of your dog depends on the appropriate use of the anesthetic more than anything else."

During surgery, the dog's breathing and heart rate are closely monitored by the veterinary staff. I.V. catheters (a tube in a vein) are often placed as a safety measure so drugs can be rapidly injected in case of an emergency, such as a reaction to anesthesia or a change in heart rate, Eldredge says.

Veterinarians can also use drugs to prevent pain before, during and after the operation. The use of pain-relieving drugs before and during surgery is the sign of a progressive veterinarian, Wilford says. "It's documented that if you administer pain relief before pain is induced, less pain occurs and the risk of resulting chronic pain is reduced."

Veterinarians used to believe that if an animal was in pain, it would lie still and recover better. That's not true, Wilford says. "It's now been proven that if they hurt, they're restless and they can't lie still," she says. "If you offer the animals pain relief, they'll rest better, be in less pain and be at less risk of tearing an incision. If you're shopping for a veterinarian and you run across one who doesn't believe in pain relief for a routine surgery, then knock on the next door until you find somebody who understands the need for it."

Next Step: Recovery Period