

Spay and Neuter Facts

Learn the facts about spay and neutering dogs.

Traditionally, a spay or neuter surgery takes place when a pup is approximately 6 months old, before puberty sets in. The age of 6 months was chosen arbitrarily years ago and isn't set in stone. Today, veterinarians know that a spay or neuter surgery can be performed as early as 6 to 8 weeks of age with no harmful effects.

Young puppies recover more quickly than older ones from a spay or neuter surgery, and are often up and about in a matter of hours. Veterinarians have learned from experience that the procedures are easier to perform on young pups (due to less fat and muscle tissue). Overall, the younger animals recover faster and with less pain.

Early spay and neuter surgery (prepuberal gonadectomy in vet speak) has been practiced for more than 25 years and has been shown to have no significant short- or long-term side effects.

Some breeders have puppies spayed or neutered before sending them to their new homes at 8 to 10 weeks of age. This ensures that puppies sold as pets, or those that have genetic or conformation flaws, won't reproduce. Many animal shelters also spay or neuter young puppies before adopting them out. They see the procedure as a way of reducing the flow of animals through their doors.

Of course, it's not necessary for all puppies to be altered at such a young age. Most veterinarians prefer to wait until a puppy is at least 4 months (16 weeks) old before performing a spay or neuter surgery. It's earlier than sexual maturity, and the pup is still resilient. "If it's a puppy that's already in a home, I prefer to wait until the immune system has matured," Dr. Wilford says. "The vaccines are finished, they're completely dewormed and they're not having any common puppy problems, such as diarrhea. I like to spay or neuter puppies at 4 to 5 months of age, which gets them before the first heat in the females."

In some clinics, the surgery is scheduled to coincide with a puppy's final series of vaccinations, which is usually around 4 months of age. This makes things convenient for the owner and the veterinarian because the puppy needs to come into the clinic anyway.

Spaying or neutering your puppy is the right thing to do for both of you. A female dog is relieved of the stress of twice-yearly heat cycles and no longer faces the prospect of cystic ovaries, pregnancies, pyometra (a serious and sometimes fatal uterine infection) and irregular heat cycles. Nor do you have to keep her confined during estrus.

A neutered male has less risk of prostate enlargement and perianal adenomas (tumors of glands found around the anus) and no risk of testicular cancer. He's less territorial, gets along better with other dogs and is less likely to roam. The willingness and ability of altered males and females to protect their home and family remains intact, as does their love for their people.

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