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Should You Neuter Your Male Dog for BEHAVIOR Problems?

————— by Lynn Stockwell —————

At the post-end of the day (the awkward time at most vet's offices in between official closing hours and the act of leaving with doors locked behind us), a client walked in with a question: her 6-year old intact Dachshund was being an absolute hormonal boy in reaction to a bitch in heat somewhere. The owner suspects that the bitch had urinated in the yard, which might explain why this particular episode was more severe. The dog would stand at the front door and whine constantly. She asked what she could do about it. There are multiple answers to this, which make it no easy fix regardless of which avenue she took. Since she came into a vet clinic, the first answer would be to obviously neuter the dog. At 6 years old, any benefit he's derived from keeping his testicles and allowing his hormones to positively affect growth and

development has obviously taken its course. As intact males age, the risk of prostate enlargement (which does NOT equal cancer!) increases, which is also why older men must bend over for the doctor and ads for questionable saw palmetto-based supplements pepper the airwaves. In addition, removing his testicles has the potential to significantly reduce his drive to use them. Unfortunately, from a training and behavior point-of-view, that last point is a bit of a gray zone. Let's look at the behavior of neutered dogs (MALES ONLY, in keeping with the spirit of the situation in question), especially considering the extremely large population from which one can sample. While veterinary clinics see a great number of these dogs on a regular basis, one drawback is that the environment is simply not suitable to making definitive statements. I would be more inclined to give weight to those from a trainer who is able to observe and work the dog either in the home environment, or in a residency program, which allows said trainer to pretty much assimilate the dog into his/her lifestyle. These people are actively working with the dog to learn appropriate behavior to be a good citizen in society, and it is the rare trainer who requires all dogs to be sterilized as a part of their program.

Neutered dogs still actively hump other dogs, objects, and can even achieve a mating tie with a bitch given the right circumstances

While humping is not always a sexual behavior, especially in a pack setting in which there is no bitch around (much less one intact, even less so one in estrus), it is certainly not a behavior people like to see. Unfortunately, as dogs are dogs, it is part of their repertoire. It establishes hierarchy, creates puppies, and in many dogs (indeed, more than one might initially think), is also pleasurable. No one likes to talk about it, of course! Neutering a dog might decrease the desire to mate, but for a 6-year old dog, that's very questionable. A younger dog might not have had the time to mature and allow his sexual drives to come forward, so he's not going to be aware of bitches in heat and what those smells mean. Many older dogs might have that drive diminished, but not completely disappear. And there are the rare few for whom neutering makes absolutely no difference at all, and they will STILL attempt a tie given the opportunity. The good thing is that, to paraphrase what a good friend wrote about the issue, ties with court eunuchs are much shorter in duration and produce no puppies. Neutered males still hump pillows and cushions. They can still hump other dogs. If you were unaware, there are sex toys available to dogs whose owners feel the desire to give them an "outlet" for their humping. But, in the long run, it's just easier to correct the

behavior instead of cater to it.

Neutered males can be territorial and aggressive

Good fences make good neighbors, until the dog starts in with how he thinks he should run the show. Barrier aggression due to fences, which can at first seem like territorial behavior, is actually built out of frustration from the inability to physically reach the dog on the other side of the fence—a truly territorial dog is more likely to have a resource-guarding mentality, in that the house is HIS. The yard is HIS. That toy over there is HIS. That person on the end of the leash is HIS. He is anxious that someone will try to take what is his, and it is easier to be offensive and prevent them from TAKING these things than it is to try to take it back once it's gone. We see it in the dogs who separate spouses, do not allow even good friends to hug each other, and give warning signs of a very real impending bite should anyone reach for anything that is THEIRS, concrete or otherwise. They are the perfect Abusive Boyfriend dog. Appropriately, these are NEUTERED MALES we're talking about, and if you think I'm only talking about the stereotypical five-pound landshark with Big Dog Syndrome, you better think again. At the vet's office, some of the smaller landsharks can be handled with welding gloves, a muzzle, a towel and possibly a syringe full of sedating drugs. The ones about which you need to think again need a tranquilizer pill 3 hours before the appointment, and the possibility of (but attempts to otherwise avoid) using a rabies pole and a syringe full of sedating drugs. These are NEUTERED MALES. Dogs with no testosterone in their systems—it's hard to blame the aggression on hormones when there are none present!

Neutered males slip out the door, escape the yard, otherwise get lost and risk being hit by a car

Most of the owners of intact males seem to have a decent idea of what they are dealing with. In fact, the dachshund's owner is one of them. Without my knowing whether or not her yard is fenced and having not clued me in either way, she is adamant that the dog does not go outside without being on a leash that is attached to a person at the other end. While life on a leash is a bit of a downer that some reliable training can remedy, I have to give this lady a gold star in that she is properly confining and supervising a dog that is a high flight risk, mostly due to a lack of training to properly stay in his yard when off-leash and under supervision. (NB: I do not recommend leaving any dog outside unattended, especially, ESPECIALLY in an

unfenced-yard, whether or not the dog is contained with a buried cable static fence. This is where behavior problems start, medical problems manifest unseen, and tragedies occur, most of them completely preventable and a few of the freak accident variety. Even if the yard is securely fenced beyond all reasonable attempts to escape or the dog is tied out on a chew-proof cable attached to a non-slip martingale collar, I recommend supervision of some kind.) Any dog can escape a yard provided the motivation to do so is great enough. This does not always have to be a bitch in heat; it could be an errant toy, the lure of another dog outside the yard, fencing malfunctions (including inadequate enclosure or height) or the desire to chase suburban wildlife of any size. Most dogs are also not properly trained to respect a door threshold, much less that of a gate, which sets up the classic scenario of an owner chasing a loose dog, losing the dog, posting lost pet flyers, calling vet offices and shelters around town, etc etc. And whether or not the dog actually returns home is left to chance. And of course there are many dogs that just don't agree with the concept of secure confinement, be it in a crate, kennel, yard, or small room. These are remedied and managed on a case-by-case basis. Any dog that escapes in any manner, without reliable obedience to bring it back (although, with obedience the dog would ideally not be escaping in the first place!), is at risk of being hit by a car. Even street-proofing/boundary training is not a 100% guarantee that a dog in flight mode will respect the curb, but it can be a big help in reducing the possibility it will happen. Believe it or not, there is a population of dogs who are at great risk, if it hasn't already happened, of being run over by none other than their OWNERS, most often right on their own property. Seriously: I've met a dog to whom it's happened TWICE.

Neutered males have health problems

Because of the nature of castration, it should be common knowledge that cancer cannot form in an organ that is no longer present. Testicular cancer is slow-spreading enough anyway to have a high likelihood of detection before metastasizing, with castration as a cure. But the truth remains that intact males, as mentioned earlier, can have benign prostatic growth as they mature. WHEN this happens is somewhat subjective. I've assisted in appointments with 3-4 year old intact males with enlarged and non-painful prostates, and I've also been in appointments with elderly 8-10 year old dogs with normal-sized prostates. Perianal fistulas are also a reality with intact dogs, with some breeds more predisposed to them than others and sterilization is, unfortunately, not a guarantee of avoiding them completely. But what about other problems? I was lucky (perhaps that is the wrong word) to know one of the few neutered males with suspected prostate cancer. No diagnostics were ever done, but

all the symptoms were there and his owners consistently declined aggressive treatment, choosing to keep him comfortable until he was humanely euthanized. Retrospective studies using established and reputable veterinary databases have shown a correlation between loss of reproductive hormones and various disease processes, some of them very significant (including many dreaded cancers). Does correlation equal causation in this case? Not always, but the results are consistent enough and the sample populations large enough to conclude that this is more than mere chance. Does timing of the neuter matter? There is some evidence that it may, and other evidence that it may not. These studies do not by any means follow the true scientific method in terms of data collection, have no control populations and are generally conducted through surveys or records obtained said databases, and as such can be flawed to some extent. However, the fact that these results are repeatable and the numbers consistent enough to show up in paper after paper is enough to make some people reconsider the choice to neuter until later in the dog's life, if at all.

Neutered males lift their legs to urine-mark, almost to the point of obsession. Urine marking is a dirty habit, and I've written about it before. It's disrespectful in the majority of cases, and unnecessary in others. There is simply no need for any male, intact or sterile, to feel the absolute desire to lift his leg on any given thing on which he feels needs some urine—it is downright rude. The sheer number of sterile males who go around on walks marking every tree, every bush, every corner curb until there is no urine left with which to mark (and even then the behavior still continues!) tells me that the problem lies not with the testicles so much as it does the mentality of the person holding the end of the leash. A male dog can be taught to relieve himself in one urination (or two at most) instead of multiple squirts here and there. Most dogs actually do not empty their bladders completely, and occasional marking might occur during free play time or on an off-leash walk. The key word here is occasional; it must not be obsessive. I welcome a dog that loves to explore its environment and expand some boundaries in terms of what's out there in this big world—what I draw the line at is a dog that thinks it needs to own, through a drop of urine, every little thing out there. Whether or not a dog decides to lift his leg during urination is completely up to him. A fair number of castrati seem to do this, and an intriguing amount of sexually intact dogs remain squatters during their lifetime. With this said, neutering is absolute not a guarantee that your dog will never lift his leg to urine-mark objects, or even empty his bladder completely; and again, neutering is not a guaranteed “fix” for the dog that already does lift his leg during urination.

Neutered males are energetic and require exercise

A good friend of mine was in conversation with a client over whether or not the client should neuter their dog. The notion was brought up that he would “calm down” if neutered. My friend’s words were, to paraphrase, “I don’t think dogs keep their energy in their testicles.” However, it’s commonly stated that dogs DO calm down after they are surgically sterilized. My experience with vast numbers of castrati in a veterinary setting, as well as working with them in a professional capacity as a trainer, tell me otherwise. Dogs calm down because they have been physically and mentally fulfilled through exercise and stimulation. They are calm because of their confidence in appropriate choices in life, their ability to make those choices, and their respect and trust of the people around them, specifically the one with whom they live and train with most often. Bear in mind that this doesn’t mean these dogs can sit around in a zen state all day doing absolutely nothing; but that they are calm through fulfillment of simply being allowed to “be a dog,” with all the rights, responsibilities and restrictions thereof. They do not calm down because certain parts of the body have been removed. Even dogs that have had amputations, or those in wheelchairs, or even those few who live as two-legged specimens have not experienced decreased levels of energy due to missing limbs. The dogs who have undergone ear canal ablations or cataract removal surgery are actually MORE energetic, because the sources of pain, infection or inability to move freely without running into something have been removed. Dogs whose tails were docked at birth, or who had pieces of ear cartilage snipped away for cosmetic purposes do not experience a lack of energy due to those procedures. Even dogs who have had an intestinal resection and anastomosis, or even an entire spleen removed are unchanged after appropriate recovery period of cage rest and exercise restriction. People think that hyperactivity is cute, except when it gets in the way of leading what one MIGHT describe as a “normal” life. In reality, it’s not. Having boundless amounts of energy and nowhere to direct it is no way to go through life. Dogs are social creatures, and being excluded because of something that can easily be controlled through humane and effective training is very stress-inducing. It is frustrating to the dog to not be able to be with company. It is the equivalent of mental torture to have a mind that is so anxious and stressed that the dog can’t think rationally. It is our job to teach these skills to our dogs so that they can be included in a calm, safe manner. In closing, there are many reasons to neuter a dog, most of them health-related and even then, as mentioned before, some of those are coming into question more and more. Anytime someone recommends you neuter your dog for behavioral reasons, caveat emptor. With that said, there are some notable exceptions put forth by Heather Houlahan while, relating to golden retrievers as per her blog

entry, go for all dogs: Any [dog] that lifts a hostile lip at a human being loses its gonads. Every. Single. Time. Any [dog] that starts fights with other dogs loses its gonads. Every. Single. Time. No [dog] gets to use its gonads before age four (bitches) or six (dogs). In other words, the dog is culled from the gene pool. These are not traits we want to pass on to future generations (unless you run with the Fila or the Ovcharka crowd, but that's neither here nor there). Remember: "culling" does not necessarily mean euthanizing or killing the dog—and yes, there is a difference. Neutering is never a guaranteed cure for any behavioral issues. The only guarantees you do have are that:

Your dog is rendered permanently sterile and will not reproduce

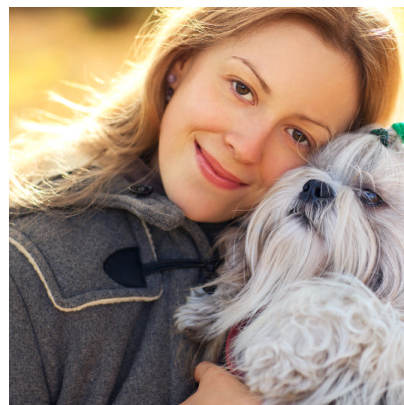
He will never develop cancer in organs he no longer has.

Do the right thing and train your dog right instead of depending on an elective surgery to do the training for you. And finally, don't hesitate at all to neuter your dog if you feel that's the right choice for both him and you. Don't do it because it's "the responsible thing." What is more demoralizing is that sterilization is considered the height of responsible pet ownership when so many dogs are overweight (or even outright obese), lacking in canine social skills, unsocialized to living in our world, aggressive, not housetrained and/or living lives of anxiety, stress, and frustration behind suburban fences (except for the 1-2 times a year they are taken to the veterinarian). Responsibility is training, supervising and properly confining a dog so that it can live life in the fullest, healthiest manner in a society with the people to whom it is attached. And there is absolutely no reason that owners of well-trained, socialized, mentally- and physically-fulfilled intact dogs should be regarded as anything BUT responsible!

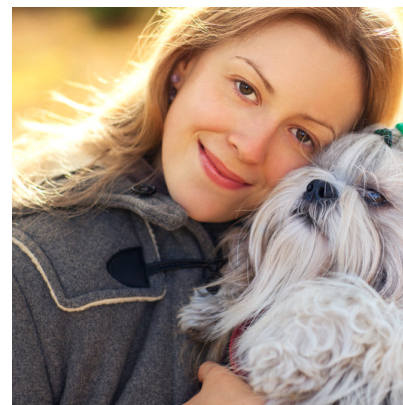
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