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6 Months or 6 Years: When and If to Spay or Neuter

POSTED 10.02.18 BY [DREW MCWATTERS, DVM](#)

Veterinarians have traditionally recommended ubiquitous spaying and neutering dogs and have recommended doing it at no later than 6 months of age. This recommendation came from a desire to decrease the stray pet population and decrease the

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incidence of reproductive disease while at the same time decreasing anesthetic risks associated with anesthesia of young puppies. However, several recent studies have called into question whether this really is the best practice. These studies have showed impacts of spaying and neutering (both positive and negative) on 4 general areas of health: **weight, orthopedic disease, cancer**, and **urinary health**. I'll give you the general findings in each of these areas and then give you my recommendation on how we practically apply this information to your dog.

Weight

Spaying and neutering have long been implicated in weight gain and the studies confirmed there is moderate increase in the risk of

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obesity for dogs who have been spayed and neutered. However, the studies did not show the age of spaying or neutering to change the risk of obesity. It is also important to note that while spaying and neutering decrease metabolic rate, environmental factors such as lack of exercise and excessive calorie intake play much bigger roles in the obesity epidemic and dogs who have been spayed or neutered will still maintain a healthy weight if fed and exercised appropriately.



Orthopedic Disease

This may be the area with the most clearly defined risks and benefits. It is well documented that spaying and neutering before skeletal maturity is reached (before the growth plates have closed) will delay closure of the growth plates which will result in disproportionately long limbs. This changes the stress and load on the joints which increases the risk of orthopedic diseases such as cranial cruciate rupture (analogous to an ACL tear) and hip dysplasia. This risk is most dramatic in large and giant breed dogs (adult weight over 50 pounds) considering they are already more at-risk for orthopedic disease and their growth plates close at a later age than smaller dogs. Because of this, at the Pet Hospitals we recommend large and

giant breed dogs wait to be spayed or neutered until they reach skeletal maturity (generally between 12-15 months of age).

Cancer

If orthopedic disease had the most clearly defined risks and benefits, the role spaying and neutering plays in cancer may be the hardest to define, especially the risks. We have long known that uterine infections, ovarian, vaginal, and testicular tumors are prevented by timely spaying or neutering. We know that spaying before the first heat cycle reduces the incidence of mammary cancer by 99.5% while spaying after the first heat cycle but before the second decreases the incidence by 92%. Spaying after the second heat cycle decreases the incidence rate by 74%. Spaying after

the 3rd heat cycle provides minimal protection against mammary cancer. Spaying or neutering at any age removes the potential for uterine infections, ovarian, and testicular cancer by removing the organ that will be affected.

Where it gets complicated is cancers such as hemangiosarcoma (blood vessel cancer of the liver and spleen), osteosarcoma (bone cancer), and lymphoma show a mild to moderate increase incidence in dogs who are spayed and neutered, regardless of the age when they were spayed and neutered.

Urinary Health

Dogs who are neutered have a dramatic decrease in the incidence of benign prostatic hyperplasia

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(BPH), while spayed or neutered dogs show a mild increase in bladder inflammation and moderate increase in urinary incontinence.

So, what do we do with all this information...?

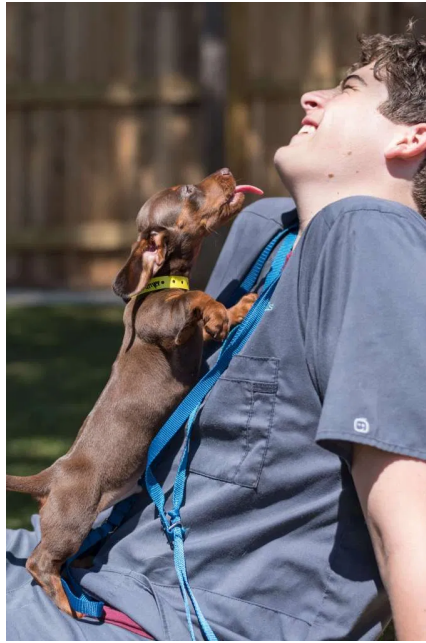
Everyday, veterinarians sift through information like this, often with conflicting conclusions, and determine the best recommendations for our patients. Research is ongoing and more studies are needed to confirm or refute what we know so far. While the data seems to suggest that spaying and neutering at any age increases the risk for many conditions and diseases, it may not be that black and white. In addition, overarching all of this data are studies that consistently show

spayed and neutered dogs have an increased longevity over intact dogs.

In my opinion, the orthopedic risks from early spaying and neutering are clear while the cancer risks are less clear. This is because orthopedic diseases are usually young to middle age dog problems and all the dogs in the studies would be equally susceptible to developing orthopedic disease. Whereas cancer is generally a disease of older dogs and the spayed and neutered dogs tend to live to an older age than intact dogs. Because of this, the decreased incidence of cancer in intact dogs may be affected by the dogs not living long enough to develop cancer.

The doctors at The Pet Hospitals

recommend
spaying and
neutering all
dogs who will
not be used for
breeding due
to the positive
impacts on
population



control, the prevention of certain
reproductive problems, and the
overall increased longevity of dogs
that are spayed and neutered. The
age to spay or neuter can vary
depending on the individual dog and
dog's health. In general, in small
breed dogs (less than 50 pounds)
we recommend spaying around 6
months. In large breed dogs (greater
than 50 pounds) we recommend
waiting until after skeletal maturity
but before the second heat
cycle(usually 12-15 months) in
spaying female dogs or anytime

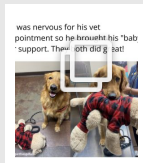
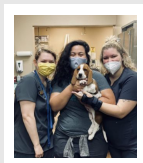
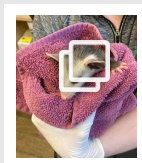
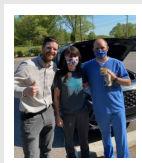
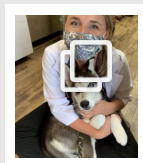
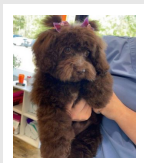
after skeletal maturity in male dogs. Some clients still choose to spay or neuter early for a variety of reasons. We are happy to comply with those requests. As with all medical decisions about your dog, we want to make sure you have as much information as possible before making the decision to spay or neuter.

Please talk to your dog's doctor about your dog's specific situation to determine the best age to spay or neuter your dog.

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