

Desexing

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Desexing - the pros and cons and current scientific data about desexing

Desexing, neutering or sterilisation (also called speying in female dogs, castration in male dogs) is a common procedure in Australia. It involves the removal of the testicles in males, and ovaries +/- uterus in females. There are cultural differences around the world as to how frequently pets are desexed.

In Australia the main reasons for desexing include population control, avoiding unwanted puppies, minimising some health risks and reducing some behavioural issues. There has been a lot of recent discussion and controversy about the appropriate age to desex, and the health and behavioural benefits or risks.

Traditionally, in Australia dogs have been desexed before sexual maturity at around six months of age. Surgery at this younger age is technically easier due to the smaller patient size and lack of body fat, allowing for a more rapid recovery. However, there have been many recent scientific suggestions that desexing before skeletal maturity in some dog breeds may have adverse effects. Currently there are no randomised, controlled, lifetime studies to provide unequivocal evidence on the appropriate timing for desexing.

Medical conditions treated or prevented by desexing include testicular and ovarian cancers; pyometra; prostatic hyperplasia and may improve the chance for successful treatment of some hormonally associated conditions such as prostate abscesses, vaginal prolapse and perianal tumours. There is controversy as to the role of desexing in preventing mammary tumour development.

For some dog breeds, particularly large dog breeds, there is emerging data suggesting that desexing after skeletal maturity (12-15 months +) may decrease the risk of joint disease and some forms of cancer. Not all breeds are equally affected, and there are genetic variations in populations in different countries between breeds. Smaller breeds of dogs tend not to get the joint disorders.



From a behavioral perspective there is very little scientific evidence suggesting that desexing helps with behavioural issues. Castration in dogs reduced urine marking in the house, mounting and roaming. There is no scientific agreement that castration reduces aggression.

Early life experiences are likely to have a greater impact on a dog's behaviour than neutering.

The decision regarding when and if to desex needs to be made by the individual owner, in consultation with their vet, considering their individual dog's needs and potential health risks. A useful free access article reference is provided (Hart 2020).

Hart BL, Hart LA, Thigpen AP, Willits NH. Assisting decision-making on age of neutering for 35 breeds of dogs:

associated joint disorders, cancers, and urinary incontinence. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. 2020 Jul 7;7:388.

