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Neutering dogs – What? Why? When?



What is it?

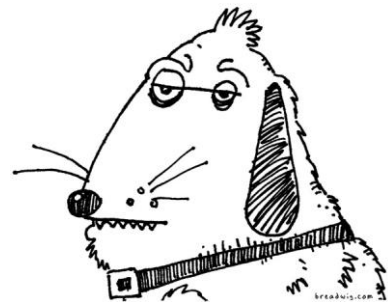
When we neuter an animal we take away their ability to reproduce. In males we castrate, which is the removal of the testicles. In females we spay, which is the removal of the ovaries and sometimes the womb. These procedures may seem a bit radical but actually they are very well tolerated and by doing them we stop the production of sexual hormones which aren't needed if an animal isn't breeding and can cause no end of trouble.

Why bother neutering?

There are lots of good reasons for neutering:

- ***Prevent unwanted litters*** – just have a look around the local rescue centers and you'll get a feel for why this is important.
- ***Stop the sex hormone driven behaviours*** – take males for example, neutering won't spoil their boyish charm but it will calm down any testosterone driven behaviours. Males will be more inclined to disappear off looking for lady dogs. They are more prone to fighting with other entire males which is a muscle flexing exercise to showcase their confidence. Should you have an entire male who is a bit of a softy he can become a punch bag for more confident entire males who sense the soft-boy's testosterone and see him as an easy target. Whereas castrated males aren't a threat and aren't worth beating up. Then of course there are the unsociable intimate relationships that entire dogs may develop with your leg that can be frustrating.

Then there are the girls – female dogs and cats don't tend to have any particular behaviour traits associated with being entire. However, bitches in particular, can commonly get false pregnancies if entire and not breeding. These false pregnancies are a natural phenomenon – in the domestic dogs' wild counterparts a less confident female has the ability to lactate for a more confident female's litter. But in a domestic setting the flood of maternal hormones that come with a false pregnancy can leave the bitch confused and distressed and at its worst can render a bitch desperately nurturing and defending a nest full of toys.



- ***Prevent disease*** – this is undoubtedly the most important reason. There are some serious and in some cases life threatening diseases which can be prevented by neutering. This is of

major importance in the bitch as the diseases in entire bitches are very severe and common. It is also a consideration in male dogs as although their problems are nowhere near as severe or common as those in the bitch they are worth thinking about.

Entire bitches are at great risk of developing mammary tumours (or breast cancer in human speak). Some of these mammary lumps will be benign and grow gradually but a significant proportion will be malignant and spread cancer to other organs. Well the good news is neutering can dramatically lower this risk. It doesn't stop there though, entire bitches will commonly get an infection which results in their womb filling up with pus (called a pyometra). If this condition is not treated very quickly by emergency surgery the bitch could go into septic shock and die. Still there is good news – if there is no womb there can be no pyometra, so spaying entirely removes the risk.

Entire males are a bit luckier if left intact. They are still more vulnerable to testicular tumours, perineal hernias and prostatic disease than their castrated counterparts, but these problems are easier to treat and less common than the lot of the poor old bitch!

Is there a down-side to neutering?

Yes, but it's all relative.

Undoubtedly the biggest problem in neutered dogs is weight gain. When animals are neutered their metabolism slows down a bit. This means that their bodies tick over slower and they need fewer calories to function normally. They also can get a bit greedier when they are neutered. This makes staying slim a bit of a battle. After your pet is neutered you will need to taper back their food in order to keep their weight stable. Sometimes you don't need to cut back much but in some individuals their food may need to be cut by as much as a third or even a half to beat the bulge! We can help though, we offer free weight checks post-neutering to help you keep control of your pet's weight and prevent them getting fat which is much easier than having to diet them later.

Testosterone is also a confidence giver for our male dogs, so if your boy is already a little anxious, castration may not be right for him just yet. If you are considering castrating a timid or nervous dog, please contact us and we can discuss the potential effect of castration and whether that is the right thing in your particular circumstances.

The other worry people have is that their dog's coat will change post neutering. This is a potential problem but is actually quite unusual. There are some dogs who develop a fluffier lighter coat after being neutered (this effect is more common in Spaniels and Setters) but the change is purely cosmetic as the skin and coat are still healthy.

Bitches are at increased risk of urinary incontinence if they are neutered regardless of what age they are done. However, only a small proportion of neutered bitches are affected and the vast majority of these are easily controlled and the problem doesn't compromise the bitches (or your) quality of life.

Recent evidence points to an increased incidence in joint disease in larger breeds who are neutered before they are fully grown. This is obviously a serious issue in a big dog but as long as the neutering is done after they are skeletally mature there is no difference in the incidence of joint disease compared to entire dogs.

Sounds like a good idea, when should I neuter my pet?

BOY DOGS:

If your boy is displaying any undesirable male traits, particularly involving confrontational behaviours or aggression with other male dogs then we may best castrate earlier. This can be as young as 6 months old. The reason for this is that the bad testosterone-driven behaviours can become habits and breaking the pattern by neutering early will make training them much easier. For more chilled out boys we prefer to neuter a bit later, once they are fully grown. This can be from 8 months old in small breeds or from 12 months old in bigger breeds.

GIRL DOGS:

There is much controversy surrounding when to spay bitches. The reason for the controversy is that there isn't a right answer and there are pros and cons for both pre-season and post season spaying. One thing is clear though, across the board regardless of breed, neutered dogs live longer overall.

Here is an outline of the arguments for and against spaying bitches prior to their first season...

	Spaying before 1 st season
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your bitch will not come into season at all, which let's face it is massively more convenient.• No risk of accidental mating.• The risk of a bitch spayed before her 1st season getting a mammary tumour is much lower than one spayed after her 1st season.• The surgery is generally easier and, therefore, less risky in younger bitches, leading to fewer post operative complications and shorter recovery times.
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Traditionally it was thought that the risk of urinary incontinence was greater in bitches spayed before their first season. However there is no conclusive evidence supporting this claim.• There are forms of incontinence that occur in puppies. Some of these improve after the 1st season.• Juvenile vaginitis – this is a polite description for a condition in some bitches where their vagina gets inflamed and sore. This improves after the 1st season.• Infantile vulva – another polite description. This occurs particularly in larger breeds. If the bitch doesn't have a season her vulva never develops into an adult bulging form. Couple this little vulva with a big bottom and some individuals can suffer from a vulva that is tucked in deep which can cause urine scalding and dermatitis.• Joint disease – large breeds spayed before they are fully grown are at increased risk of joint diseases such as cruciate rupture and hip dysplasia.

So what is the right answer? Well the jury is still out, with some evidence supporting the sooner the better and some more recent studies in large breed dogs supporting spaying at a year old at least. More research needs to be done as the evidence is contradictory and weak, however we have to make a recommendation. So here it is... For now we are recommending spaying **small and medium breeds at 5-6 months old before their first season and larger breeds at a minimum of 1 year old and 3 months after their season**. We are keeping this under review and hopefully evidence will come out over the coming years which tells us exactly what we should be doing.

What next?

We offer a free check prior to neutering, at this point we can answer any questions and check that your individual pet is suitable for surgery. Now I know that the word surgery is scary but don't be disheartened, for most owners the biggest nightmare of the whole neutering process is that the animals recover too fast and they are supposed to be resting!

Gosh it's all a bit complicated! Should you have any concerns – just contact us and we will be happy to discuss it with you.