



Neutering Early... Good or Bad?

By Rose DiLeva VMD, MS, CVCP, CVA, Animal Wellness Center

When I was a young veterinary school student, we were taught that all spays and neuters should be done when the dog was young at 6 months of age. There was really no explanation as to why 6 months was chosen rather than 7 months or any other time. As a matter of fact, kittens and puppies in shelters can be and have been neutered and spayed at 12 weeks of age, sometimes earlier. It is used as a means of population control. Additionally, it was a means of reducing, if not eliminating, urine marking, inter-species aggression and behaviors that result from the testosterone present in the male canine body.

Fortunately, veterinary researchers have done studies comparing the incidence of certain cancers with the age at which the animal was spayed or neutered. For example, in 1988 a study was done by Prymak et al. showing that spayed females were twice as likely to get hemangiosarcoma of the spleen as were intact females with the same tumor. A study by Ware and Hopper, in 1999, showed that spayed females were four times as likely to develop a type of cardiac tumor, called hemangiosarcoma, as were intact females.

Most recently, a study was done at the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital of the University of California at Davis. The researchers (Dr. B. Hart, Dr. L. Hart, Dr. A. Thigpen, Dr. N. Willitis), did a retrospective study and examined veterinary hospital records over a 14 ½ - year period. They examined 1170 intact and neutered / spayed German Shepherd Dogs for joint disorders and cancers. The type of cancers studied were osteosarcoma (bone cancer), lymphoma (cancer of the lymph nodes), hemangiosarcoma (blood borne cancer), and mast cell cancer.

Results indicated that male German Shepherd dogs that were neutered in the first year of life had a threefold chance of acquiring at least one joint disorder (primarily hip dysplasia and cranial cruciate ligament rupture). Seven percent of intact males were diagnosed with one or more joint disorders contrasted with 21% of males that were neutered prior to one year of age. The same holds true for female, intact, German Shepherds with a slight variation

on percentages. Statistics showed that up to 17% of females spayed before one year of age acquired at least one joint disorder, compared to 5% in intact females. Cancer was also investigated. Results indicated that the occurrence of at least one cancer in intact females was less than 1%. Urinary incontinence in the studied population of intact females was 0% compared to 7% in females that were spayed before turning 1 year old.

As a result of this information, many veterinarians today are recommending spaying and neutering after the pet is a year old. This can become an issue in male German Shepherds because of the behaviors that result from testosterone as the dog matures. None the less, I too recommend waiting, if at all possible, until the dog is at least 1 year old. Further studies are necessary to get a better understanding of this issue.

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