

Spaying and Neutering: Why it's so important



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It happened almost overnight: your cute, well-mannered little rabbit reached puberty. Suddenly, your baby has become unmanageable. He has taken an unexpected 'interest' in your ankles. The circling and honking are certainly very cute, but the nipping and mounting definitely must stop. Plus, your rabbit has seemingly forgotten why you've provided him with a litterbox. Sound familiar? Read on to find out what you can do to help your rabbit return to his sweet, well-mannered self.

BEHAVIOURAL BENEFITS

Upon reaching sexual maturity (at 3-4 months for small breeds and 4-6 month for larger breeds), a rabbit's behaviour becomes driven principally by his or her hormones. While the courtship behaviour (honking and circling) exhibited by an unaltered rabbit is cute and endearing at first, most of the changes your rabbit will go through after reaching sexual maturity are considered to be unacceptable. *For example:*

1. Your rabbit may start spraying urine to mark territory. Even female rabbits may do this. If you have ever been the object of your rabbit's affections and been 'marked' with urine, you know that it is not a pleasant gift. In addition, high hormone levels of unaltered rabbits give their urine a foul odour.
2. Your previously litter trained rabbit may suddenly stop using his litterbox. The urge to mark territory can be overwhelming for an unaltered rabbit. In addition to spraying, your rabbit may start to drop feces around his area to mark territory.
3. Your previously cute, cuddly rabbit may suddenly become aggressive. Females may become especially 'nest' or 'cage' protective and start lunging, nipping and growling.
4. Chewing and digging activities may become intensified. Note that chewing and digging are

normal rabbit behaviours, but these activities sometimes become intensified in unaltered rabbits.

5. Your rabbit may start incessantly mounting things such as other pets, your legs, your feet, etc. Rabbits - especially males - may become increasingly interested in family members, other pets or inanimate objects in a new, sexual way. Some females will mount, too. Your rabbit may start honking and circling the object of his or her affections. Honking and circling are rabbit courtship behaviours. Some rabbits continue to honk and circle even after being altered.

6. Same-sex siblings or other previously bonded pals of the same sex may start to fight to establish dominance. Changes in behaviour associated with sexual maturity affect your unaltered rabbit's ability to keep friendships or make new ones. Altered rabbits of the same sex are much more likely to live in harmony than their unaltered counterparts.

We know that spaying and neutering deters, if not eliminates, most negative behaviours associated with sexual maturity within 3 months. It is unfair to surrender your rabbit to a shelter or to an outdoor or basement hutch because he or she has become a hormonally-charged nuisance. Have your pet spayed or neutered and give him a chance to remain an important member of your family.

HEALTH BENEFITS

Unspayed female rabbits have a very high chance of developing uterine, mammary or ovarian cancer during their lives. Unofficial statistics indicate that between 50% to 80% of all unspayed females will be affected by cancer, by age 5. The incidence of testicular cancer in unneutered males is lower, but does occur. By contrast, spay and neuter surgeries, if performed

by a rabbit savvy veterinarian, carry little risk (success rates should be close to 100%). For more information, see our handout on finding a rabbit savvy veterinarian.

PREVENTING UNWANTED LITTERS

In addition to the many health and behavioural benefits of having your rabbits spayed or neutered, there is also the benefit of preventing pregnancies. Female rabbits do not come into heat in the same way dogs do. They are able to become pregnant at any time.

Often people will decide to get two litter mates, supposedly of the same sex, so that their new pet will have company. However, it is extremely difficult to accurately determine the gender of young rabbits before the male's testicles descend (at approximately 12-14 weeks of age). Many times, the unsuspecting owners will actually have two rabbits of the opposite sex. Within months, they will mostly likely have experienced the birth of a number of new litters, which often results in the offspring being surrendered to shelters or 'set free' in a park and left to fend for themselves.

Please note that house rabbits are domestic prey animals who have no natural instincts of how to care for themselves in the wild. They are easy targets for cats, dogs and wildlife and are unable to distinguish between safe and toxic plants. Most will die shortly after being released. This sad scenario is easily avoided by having your pets spayed and neutered.

You should only trust an experienced rabbit vet to assess the gender of a young rabbit, although there are times when even a vet will have difficulty until the rabbit is older. The best way to ensure that unwanted litters don't occur is to NEVER introduce two unaltered rabbits, no matter what the age. Baby rabbits need to stay with their mother until they are weaned at 8 weeks old. Cute little babies may look small but they are able to conceive by 14 weeks old. ALL siblings should be separated from one another after they have been weaned and until they have been accurately sexed and spayed or neutered. Leaving "baby" siblings together, or trying to

separate all the girls from the boys is a mistake that many people make. It only takes one wrongly sexed rabbit to create a number of new litters. DO NOT take this chance.

Finding homes for unwanted litters is not an easy task, and often leads to more rabbits being surrendered to shelters. For every litter that is produced, a number of shelter rabbits are euthanized because there are simply more rabbits in need of homes than there are homes willing to adopt them.

Male rabbits are still fertile up to a month after being neutered and should remain separated from unaltered female rabbits during this time.

A FINAL NOTE

If your rabbit is not spayed or neutered, please consider having this important surgery performed on your pet. Your rabbit will not become fat and lazy or lose his personality after the surgery. In fact, your bunny will be happier and healthier for it. In addition, you will be able to allow your rabbit to enjoy the company of another without contributing to the domestic rabbit overpopulation problem. By having your pet spayed or neutered, you will be indirectly saving the lives of shelter rabbits by not producing new litters.

