

## Should I have my rabbit castrated/spayed?

Having your rabbit neutered is one of the most important steps you can take to help your pet enjoy a happy, healthy and long life. The main reason to have your rabbit neutered is so you can keep more than one rabbit without them fighting or causing a population explosion. But there are other advantages too. Neutered rabbits are less aggressive and territorial, and are more easily litter-trained if you want to keep your pet indoors as a house rabbit.

### Male rabbits

Male rabbits (bucks) make responsive pets, but have the same drawbacks as tom cats if they're not castrated. Most are territorial and frequently spray urine, and aggression is a common problem. They will also have to live alone, which isn't fair on an animal that needs company. Neutered males are much happier and more relaxed. They can enjoy life without constantly looking for a mate and are less aggressive and smelly! Nearly all neutered males will stop spraying urine even if the operation is performed later in life. Castration is a relatively minor operation which is usually performed when the rabbit is 4 or 5 months old, when the operation is easier to perform and the anaesthetic risk is reduced. The testicles are removed via the scrotum or lower abdomen.

### Female rabbits

Having female rabbits (does) spayed is even more important. Most females become territorial and aggressive from sexual maturity onwards (4-6 months). They have repeated false pregnancies, and may growl at, scratch and bite their owners as well as attacking other rabbits. Keeping two females together - even if they are sisters - can make things worse. Spaying reduces and sometimes eliminates these behavioural problems.

Spayed females are likely to live longer than their unspayed sisters. Up to 80% of unspayed female rabbits develop uterine cancer by 5 years of age. Females who are not spayed when young and in good health may have to undergo the operation in later life if pyometra (uterine infection) or cancer develops, although usually it is too late and the cancer has already spread.

Spaying is a bigger operation than castration. It's usually performed when the rabbit is at least 4 or 5 months old. The uterus and both ovaries are removed via the abdomen.

### Is it Safe?

In the past, rabbits gained a reputation for being difficult to anaesthetise, but the risks of rabbit anaesthesia have fallen significantly in recent years. Surgery on healthy rabbits is almost as safe as in cats. However, low risk does not mean no risk. Surgery on any animal can have unexpected complications. But for most rabbits the benefits of neutering far outweigh the very small risk.

Older rabbits and those in poor health are more difficult to neuter safely. If your pet rabbit is older than 3 years or has medical problems (such as obesity, dental disease or "snuffles" and related disorders) you must discuss the risks and benefits with your vet in order to choose the best option for your pet.

### What is involved?

When you book your pet in for his/her operation with the receptionist, you will usually be asked to come in for a **pre-op check**, so that a vet can examine your rabbit and find out if

he/she is ready to be castrated / spayed. Once the vet is happy that your pet is healthy, you can book in for the operation. Rabbits should NOT BE STARVED - they should be offered food and water right up to the time of surgery and as soon as they wake up. You will be asked to bring your pet to the surgery between **8.30 and 9am** on the morning of the operation. You will be asked to read and **sign a consent form**. Please read this carefully and ask about anything you are not sure about. We also offer **microchipping** while your pet is under anaesthetic at a reduced cost.

A veterinary nurse will admit your pet provided that a pre op check has taken place. If your pet has shown any signs of being unwell in the recent past or has any allergies to medication, then please bring this to his/her attention. A nurse will then take your pet through to the hospital area where he/she will be weighed. Your pet is then bedded down in our kennels with hay and food until he/she is ready for the operation. An anaesthetic is administered to your rabbit, and a tube is then placed into the rabbit's airway and connected to an anaesthetic machine that keeps him/her asleep on a gaseous anaesthetic for the duration of the operation. A nurse monitors the anaesthetic throughout the operation, and once the operation is over your pet is kept on oxygen until he/she starts to wake up, which takes only a few minutes. Your pet will be given a pain relieving injection and returned to kennels where he/she is given a comfy bed, hay and food and is monitored until fully conscious.

Patients in for routine operations can usually go home the same day, but occasionally they will need to stay overnight if they are still sleepy from the anaesthetic. We ask owners to bring their pets in for a post op check with the nurse 2-3 days following surgery, and a second check up at 10-14 days to check the wound and remove any non-dissolvable stitches. There are no extra charges for these check-ups.

### **After Care**

When you get your rabbit home, put it in a disinfected cage (preferably indoors) with comfortable bedding (e.g. clean towels and a clean litter tray or newspapers. Most vets use special suture techniques to prevent rabbits chewing at stitches, but you should still check the operation site daily for any discharge or swelling.

Males usually bounce back from their operation, but females may be quiet for a day or so. The most important thing is to get your rabbit eating, or the digestive system may grind to a halt. We try very hard to avoid this complication, using drugs to relieve pain and stimulate the gut, but you should be prepared to tempt the rabbit with nibbles of favourite food. Freshly picked grass or herbs often work. If your rabbit isn't eating by next morning, call the vet for advice. You should also monitor the rabbits' droppings and contact the vet if few or none are produced.

### **If you have two rabbits.....**

If you have two rabbits of the same sex living together, have them neutered at the same time and keep them together. If you have a male and a female, you need to be a bit more careful. Male rabbits remain fertile for up to 4 weeks after castration. Females must be kept away from males for about 14 days after being spayed. It's best to keep them separate (but in adjacent cages) except when you can supervise them very closely.

### **Should I have more than one rabbit?**

Every bunny needs a friend. It's wonderful watching a bonded pair interact, but rabbits are territorial creatures - introductions must be gradual and carefully supervised!

- Neutered male + spayed female is by far the easiest combination.
- Keeping two males or females together can be difficult or impossible unless they have grown up together. They must be neutered as soon as possible, and never separated, even for short periods of time.
- Seek expert advice before trying to introduce two rabbits of the same sex who are more than 3-4 months old.