

Spaying, Neutering and Reproductive Diseases of Avian and Exotic Pets

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Many of us have more experience with pet dogs and cats, and we have been told that they need to be spayed and neutered to stop overpopulation. Another important reason for female dogs and cats to be spayed is to prevent life threatening infection and cancer. But many people that acquire a unique pet do not realize that they may need to be spayed or neutered also.

Female animals in many species have a very high risk of developing disease if they are not spayed when young.

Birds: Many female birds will ovulate and lay eggs without there being a male present to fertilize the eggs. Some species, like cockatiels, are well known for excessive egg-laying. Creating all of these eggs requires a great deal of calcium, something that is lacking in the seed diets frequently fed to cockatiels. These birds become hypocalcemic and can become very ill. They may become "egg bound," unable to pass an egg which can get stuck in their oviduct. Early treatment involves calcium supplements and an injection of a hormone-blocking medicine called Lupron. Egg bound birds may require emergency surgery. Some birds develop infections of their reproductive tract, or an abnormal egg may rupture into their belly, or they may develop cancer of the reproductive tract. For many female birds, spaying before problems start is ideal. If you aren't sure if your bird is female, a quick blood test will tell us its sex. Talk with your avian veterinarian to see if it is recommended that your bird be spayed.

Reptiles: Female reptiles are not as easily stimulated to over-produce eggs as birds are, but they can develop similar problems. Reptiles require calcium in their diet AND sunlight, or a special UVB bulb to supply them with the Vitamin D3 that will help them absorb the calcium that they eat. If they are creating eggs, then they will need additional calcium as well. Reptiles require the proper levels of heat and humidity to be strong enough and hydrated enough to produce eggs. Reproductive disease in reptiles is most common in green iguanas, so it is recommended that pet iguanas be spayed to prevent life threatening reproductive disease.

Rabbits: Female rabbits have an 80% or higher chance that they will develop uterine cancer if they are not spayed. I have seen uterine cancer in rabbits as young as 4 years old. Female rabbits can also develop an endometrial aneurism, causing them to bleed to death within a few days. This usually occurs in rabbits 2-4 years old. If you have an intact female rabbit and you see red blood in their urine, that may be an emergency - rabbits do not menstruate. If the urine is orange or rust colored, however, that is normal plant pigments.

Rabbits should be spayed around 6 months of age. If you wait and spay a rabbit when she is several years old, you run the risk of her developing breast cancer later in life. Spayed, well-cared for house rabbits usually live 10 to 14 years. Unspayed rabbits usually live 5 to 9 years. Rabbits tolerate anesthesia and the spay surgery very well, so it is strongly recommended that all female rabbits be spayed.

Guinea pigs: Guinea pigs rarely develop uterine cancer. Instead, they frequently develop ovarian cysts. Some of these are very benign, not causing any problems at all. Some of them can cause altered hormone production, leading to hair loss and sometimes abdominal discomfort. There is no effective medical treatment. Spaying guinea pigs is more challenging than spaying rabbits or other rodents, and they sometimes don't tolerate anesthesia as well. In general, guinea pigs are not routinely spayed, and if

they do develop ovarian cysts, but they aren't causing the guinea pig any problems, we often do not spay them. If you see red bloody urine, it is more likely that your guinea pig has a bladder stone.

Chinchillas: Reproductive diseases are uncommon in chinchillas, but occasionally they can have a life threatening uterine infection or cancer. Any unusually colored urine or vulvar discharge is cause for concern. Chinchillas are not routinely spayed.

Rats: Female rats have a very high incidence of breast tumors, which usually start to develop after 1.5 years. They are often but not always benign. They will grow quickly, and can get as big as the rat. Treatment involves surgically removing the mass while it is still small. Because rats have breast tissue from their neck down to their genitals, they can develop multiple tumors during their lifetime. The best way to prevent tumors is to get your rat spayed when she is young, around 4 months old, to prevent the hormones from stimulating her breast tissue. Occasionally rats can develop uterine infection or cancer - bloody urine, vulvar discharge, lethargy, or weight loss would be signs to look for.

Ferrets: Female ferrets that aren't spayed can have so much estrogen produced that it affects their bone marrow and causes life-threatening anemia. But we don't have to worry about it much, because most all pet ferrets are already spayed before they are sold (unless you get a ferret directly from a private breeder).

Pet Pigs: Female pigs have a high incidence of uterine tumors, so spaying them preventatively is recommended. It is ideal to spay them when they are young and small, around 3 months old or 25 pounds.

Male animals are neutered mainly for behavioral reasons instead of to avoid cancer or infection. Occasionally some male animals can get testicular cancer. In the bird world, budgerigars are the most likely species to develop testicular tumors. In birds, the testes are inside their belly, so if a tumor develops, it can press on the nerve to their leg, causing them to hold their leg out to the side. It can also push on their other organs. Surgical neutering of budgies is a very delicate procedure that requires an experienced avian specialist, but hormone blocking injections can help. There are no preventative medical reasons to neuter male reptiles.

Male Rabbits: It is recommended to neuter rabbits mainly for behavioral reasons. When they hit puberty, around 6 months of age, many male rabbits will start spraying urine and humping everything that moves. They also may not develop good litterbox habits. In addition, an intact male rabbit will fight with other rabbits, or just hump them constantly. If you have a single male rabbit, and he isn't spraying or humping, he is using his litterbox, and you don't plan on getting another rabbit, then he does not need to be neutered. But if he is driving you crazy, neutering helps a lot. Intact male rabbits can develop testicular cancer, usually later in life. Neutering them is curative, and relatively easy. The problem that may occur is if it is an older, sickly rabbit that is too frail to be neutered. This is one of many reasons why yearly wellness exams are recommended, so we can find things early.

Male Guinea pigs: Intact males can often live with other intact males without fighting. But if you want to have a male with a female, and avoid them having babies, at least one of them needs to be sterilized. Usually we neuter the male because it is an easier and less risky surgery to neuter a male than spay a female guinea pig. Guinea pigs have a higher chance of getting an infected surgery site after being neutered, so careful surgical technique, antibiotics, and keeping them extremely clean for the week after the surgery helps decrease the risk of infection.

Male Rats and Chinchillas: Male rats that are intact get along fine, as do intact male chinchillas, so we rarely need to neuter these species. Sometimes we will neuter a male chinchilla so that he can live with a female.

Male Ferrets: Generally they are already neutered when you get them from the petstore, so nothing to worry about there.

Male Pet Pigs: Male pigs do need to be neutered, otherwise they will be very smelly, humpy, and aggressive. Neutering can be done as early as 4 weeks old, but it may be better to wait until closer to 4 months old to allow the urethra to develop fully, and potentially prevent any future urethral blockages.

When you have a bird, reptile, exotic companion mammal, or other unusual pet, the best thing you can do is to schedule a wellness exam right after you get your pet, with an experienced avian and exotic pet veterinarian. We can discuss everything that is necessary to keep your pet healthy and happy for a long life. Proper husbandry and preventive care goes a long way. Spaying or neutering your pet if indicated can extend their life, and save your pocket book from future costs of emergency care.