

Neutering Rabbits

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The obvious reason to have your rabbit neutered is so you can keep more than one rabbit without them fighting or causing a population explosion. Rabbits are social animals that need company. But there are many other advantages too.

Male Rabbits

Male rabbits (bucks) are usually bolder than females. They are responsive and enjoyable pets, but most are territorial and frequently spray urine, and aggression is a common problem. Neutered males are much happier and more relaxed. They can enjoy life without constantly looking for a mate and are much less aggressive. If carefully introduced, they can live with a spayed female or even another neutered male. Neutered males will stop spraying urine even if the operation is performed later in life.

Female Rabbits

Having female rabbits (does) spayed is equally important. Most female rabbits become territorial and aggressive from sexual maturity onwards (4-6 months). They often have repeated false pregnancies, and may growl at, bite and scratch their owners as well as other rabbits. Keeping two females together (even if they are sisters) tends to make things worse. Spaying reduces (and sometimes eliminates) all these behavioural problems. Spayed females are likely to live longer lives than their unsprayed sisters. Up to 80% of unsprayed female rabbits develop uterine cancer by the age of 5. Females who are not spayed when young and in good health may have to undergo the operation as an emergency in later life (e.g. cancer or pyometra) develops.

What happens when a Rabbit is Neutered?

Males: Castration is a relatively minor operation, which can be performed as soon as the testicles descend (10-12 weeks) although most vets wait until the rabbit is 4-5 months old. The testicles are removed via the scrotum or the lower abdomen.

Females: Spaying is a bigger operation that is usually performed when the rabbit is at least 6 months old. The uterus and both ovaries are removed via the abdomen.

In both sexes it takes from 2 weeks to 2 months for the hormones to settle down after neutering.

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. In the hands of experienced vets using modern techniques, surgery on healthy rabbits is almost as safe as in cats. It is important to understand that low risk does not mean no risk. Surgery on any animal can have unexpected complications.

Occasionally a much loved pet dies whilst being neutered. But for most rabbits the benefits of neutering far outweigh the very small risk. Older rabbits and those with medical problems 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 a suitably experienced vet in order to choose the best option for your pet.

Pre-operative Care

Take your rabbit to the vet well before the operation date to discuss the procedure. Make sure your rabbit is not too fat or thin; and ask if any pre-operative blood tests are advised. The digestive system needs to be working perfectly, so don't change the diet for a week or so before surgery. Rabbits can't vomit, so they don't need to fast before surgery. They should be offered food and water right up until the operation and as soon as they wake up.

Post Operative Care

Your rabbit should be awake, alert and preferably eating when you collect it after surgery.

Remember to check:

1. Has the rabbit been given post operative pain relief?
2. Are there any special instructions for wound care?
3. Who should be contacted if there are any problems?
4. Do you need to book a check-up appointment?
5. How long should the rabbit be on cage rest? (Usually 2 days for males, 5 or 6 days for females).
6. When you get your rabbit home, put it in a disinfected cage indoors with comfortable bedding (e.g. clean towels or Vet Bed) and a clean litter tray or newspapers. Most vets use special suture techniques to prevent the rabbit chewing at stitches, but you should still check the operation site daily.

Males usually bounce back from their operation and come home looking for supper, but females may be quiet for a day or so. The most important thing is to get your rabbit eating. This is not usually a problem if the rabbit has been given enough pain relief, but be prepared to tempt the rabbit with nibbles of favourite food. Freshly picked grass or herbs often work. If your rabbit still hasn't eaten next morning, call the vet for advice.

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. Males remain fertile for 2-3 weeks after castration and females must be kept away from males for about 10 days after being spayed. It's safer to keep pairs separated (in adjacent cages) except when you can supervise them very closely.