

I was planning to have my puppy neutered when he is 6 months old. His breeder says I should wait until he's full grown at a year or later. Which is right?

Sorry, but there is no simple answer to this question. There are many factors that should be taken into account when deciding if and when any dog should be neutered (male or female). The most basic consideration is to prevent the birth of unwanted litters of pups. Millions of dogs and cats are euthanized every year at shelters around the country. Many of these are puppies and kittens of unplanned litters that cannot be placed. The second commonly held reason for neutering is to eliminate or reduce unwanted hormonally related behavior problems. Intact (not neutered) dogs are more likely to escape the yard and roam, possibly becoming injured or lost. Males may have the unpleasant habits of urine marking in the house and sexually mounting objects. Some studies find intact males and females to be more aggressive, other studies don't find this to be true. In many behavior problem cases, neutering is recommended as part of the treatment plan.

Aside from the birth control issue and behavior problems, there are medical benefits of neutering that are considered important. Removing the reproductive organs (ovaries and uterus in female and testicles in the male) removes the risk of developing tumors in those organs later in life. In addition, females spayed at an early age have a reduced risk of developing mammary (breast) cancer. Pyometra, a life-threatening infection of the uterus is also generally prevented by early spaying. Neutered male dogs have less of a chance of developing several types of prostate disease and hernias. Some medical problems are more common in neutered dogs including obesity, urinary incontinence in females, and surprisingly, prostate cancer (adenocarcinoma) in males.

Recently, a study at the University of California, Davis compared medical records of over 700 golden retrievers between 1 and 8 years old. The findings showed that male dogs neutered before one year old had a greater chance of developing hip dysplasia (twice the rate as for intact dogs), cranial cruciate ligament tears and lymphosarcoma. Neutering before a year old in females also resulted in a higher rate of cranial cruciate ligament tears. If neutered after a year of age, female dogs had an increased risk of two cancers, hemangiosarcoma and mast cell tumors. The results of this study are significant, but limited to one breed and age group. Broader studies including more breeds and ages might reveal different trends.

Another new study of 40,000 dogs of various breeds found neutered dogs lived longer, but had a higher rate of death from cancer and autoimmune diseases. Intact dogs were more likely to die from infections and trauma. The researchers didn't differentiate between those dogs spayed early (before a year old) or late, so it is harder to use these results to help make valid decisions.

Given all of these complicated facts, a discussion with your vet based on the specifics of your dog should help you make an informed decision.

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