



# Canine Spay FAQ

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Sterilization of female dogs is commonly performed with a surgery called a spay, in which both ovaries and the uterus are removed. It is a major surgery. Owners have usual questions regarding this procedure.

## Why All Female Dogs Should Be Spayed

### -Mammary Cancer

A female dog spayed before her first heat will have a near zero chance of developing mammary cancer. After the first heat, this incidence climbs to 7% and after the second heat the risk is 25% (one in four!). It is easy to see that an early spay can completely prevent what is frequently a very difficult and potentially fatal form of cancer.

But is it too late if a dog is already past her second heat? No, in fact spaying is important even in female dogs who already have obvious tumors. This is because some mammary tumors are stimulated by estrogens; removing the ovaries, the source of estrogens, may help retard tumor spread. Spaying removes both the uterus and both ovaries and is crucial in the prevention as well as the treatment of mammary cancer.

### -Simple Convenience

The female dog comes into heat every 8 months or so. There is a bloody vaginal discharge and attraction of local male dogs. Often there is an offensive odor. All of this disappears with spaying.

## What Is Pyometra?

Pyometra is the life-threatening infection of the uterus, which generally occurs in middle-aged to older female dogs in the six to 12 weeks following heat. The hormone progesterone, which primes the uterus for potential pregnancy, does so by causing proliferation of the blood-filled uterine lining and suppression of uterine immune function. It is thus easy during heat for bacteria in the vagina to ascend to the uterus to cause infection. The uterus with pyometra swells dramatically and is filled with pus, bacteria, dying tissue, and toxins. Without treatment, the pet is expected to die. Despite her serious medical state, she must be spayed quickly if her life is to be saved. *This is an extremely common disease of older unspayed female dogs! Pyometra is not something that might happen; consider that it probably will happen.*

The older unspayed female dog has an irregular heat cycle. There is no end of cycling comparable to human menopause. If you still decide against spaying, be very familiar with the signs of pyometra. (These include loss of appetite, lethargy, vomiting, excessive thirst, marked vaginal discharge.)

## What Exactly Happens in a Spay Surgery & What Can I Expect Post Surgery?

An incision is made on the midline of the abdomen, and the three points where the ovaries and uterus attaches are tied off and cut. The abdomen is checked for bleeding and two or three layers of stitches are placed to close the incision. It is helpful to know that should the skin stitches come out, there are two layers below holding everything closed. Sometimes skin stitches are not placed but if they are present, you will need to return in 10 to 14 days to have them removed.

Most spay patients go home as if nothing had happened. They will be given pain medication for a few days. Dogs who show a propensity to lick their stitches will need an Elizabethan or "E" collar to restrict access to the stitches. This is not very comfortable for the dog but must be used strictly until the stitches are out and the incision is healed. Activity should be restricted during the week following surgery. Excessive activity can lead to swelling or fluid accumulation under the incision. If a fluid pocket forms, it should resolve on its own after a few weeks. If a fluid pocket forms and drains liquid from the incision, the dog should be re-checked with the veterinarian.

## What About Behavioral Changes Post Surgery?

The female dog's reproductive tract is dormant for most of the year. It only activates for the 3-week period of heat. This means that from a behavioral stand point, the female dog acts spayed most of the time. It is unlikely that any change will be evident.