

Spay or Neuter my Rabbit?

Adapted from an article by Dana Krempels, Ph.D.

Many people are surprised to learn that it's a rabbit's best interest to have him neutered or her spayed. But it's as true for a rabbit as it is for a dog or cat.

Depending on his/her genetics, a rabbit will reach sexual maturity somewhere between the age of 3 to 8 months. Once the sex hormones start flowing, expect to see behavioral changes. Some may be cute: a sexy rabbit may circle your legs, honking a little love song, be very needy and cuddly and follow you around incessantly. Other puberty-related behaviors are not so cute: a honking, singing bunny circling your legs who finishes the symphony with a flourish of urine spray and then sits there looking up at you for approval of this sign of unconditional love, to name just one.

Although not all rabbits exhibit objectionable behaviors upon reaching sexual maturity, many (if not most) do. One can expect to see the following behaviors once those sex hormones kick in:

- loss of previously good litter box habits
- spraying urine (a sign of love, but *still...*)
- mounting/humping of objects such as toys or your unsuspecting head
- growling and boxing
- territorial biting/nipping
- aggressive/possessive lunging and biting
- circling and honking
- destructive chewing and digging (especially in females)

When intact, both male and female rabbits usually mount one another endlessly out of sex drive and/or to establish social dominance. Same-sex pairs who tolerated each other as babies will often begin ferocious fighting upon reaching sexual maturity. This can result in permanent "unbonding," not to mention very serious physical injury

Opposite sex pairs will begin reproducing as soon as they mature. Left unchecked, an unspayed rabbit and her intact female descendants can produce more than 1300 offspring in a year. Over the course of five years this number balloons exponentially to more than 94 million! No kidding!!

A well-meaning, but naive, person might think it's a simple matter to find homes for those babies born so that a female rabbit could be bred "just once" or "so the kids can witness the miracle of birth" (For a balanced view, be sure to take the kids on a field trip to the local animal shelter's euthanasia rooms so they can also witness the "miracle of death").

It's not simple.

We have seen far too many abandoned companion rabbits (purebred and mixed breed alike) to believe that this is in any way a realistic hope. And for every rabbit produced by a casual breeder, another is put to death at an animal shelter, because there are simply not enough homes for all of them.

Unspayed female rabbits have a very high risk of uterine and mammary cancers. Our vets commonly see uterine changes and tumors in unspayed rabbits as young as eighteen months. As the bunny ages, her risk increases, and our experienced rabbit vets report that many, if not most, rabbits older than about four years who are brought in for spaying reveal uterine changes and/or tumors. A rabbit's reproductive system is evolved for constant reproduction over a relatively short lifespan. When reproduction is thwarted, but the uterus is left intact, the system can go a little haywire. It's not unexpected.

Upon reaching sexual maturity, male rabbits often begin displaying mounting behavior (on your shoes, the cat, stuffed toys, your leg, your sleeping head...), marking territory with urine and producing a musky sex odor. Male rabbits, like females, can become very aggressive when the testosterone kicks in, and the only truly viable solution for this problem is castration, also known as neutering. Testicular cancer, while far less common than uterine cancer, does occur. Neutering eliminates this risk.

How can spaying/neutering help?

Although modern rabbit medicine is far more sophisticated than it was even ten years ago, and many excellent vets are now spaying and neutering thousands of rabbits a year without incident. Still, no surgery is 100% risk-free, and each rabbit caregiver must make the decision to spay/neuter on an individual basis, in consultation with an experienced rabbit veterinarian. However, there are plenty of reasons to spay/neuter your rabbit.

- Rabbits who are spayed (females) or neutered (males) are much less likely to display objectionable sex-hormone induced behaviors such as aggression, mounting, and urine spraying.
- Neutered/spayed rabbits generally have much more reliable litter box habits than intact rabbits.
- Neutered/spayed rabbits are generally calmer than their intact counterparts, and suffer less stress from sexual frustration.
- The urine and fecal pellets of spayed/neutered rabbits have less odor than those of intact rabbits.
- Rabbits who have been spayed/neutered can live with a rabbit companion of the opposite sex without the risk of unwanted litters.
- Rabbits of the same sex can more easily learn to get along without fighting (though bonding must still be done with care and patience).
- Rabbits who are spayed/neutered will never contribute to the terrible domestic rabbit overpopulation problem.

Thousands of rabbits are abandoned every year when they outgrow their Easter Bunny cuteness. You will never have to worry if your rabbits offspring will suffer a terrible

death after being abandoned in the wilds of suburbia, being dumped at a pet store to be sold as snake food or being euthanized at an animal shelter if you don't contribute to this problem.

And just so you know....

- Spaying/neutering your companion will NOT make him/her "fat and lazy." Lack of exercise, wrong foods and boredom will do that.
- Your rabbit will still love you after she's spayed/he's neutered. He might not be as clingy, and you may notice a change in the sex-hormone induced behaviors. But the basic personality usually does not change, especially if the rabbit is altered at a relatively young age.

Spay/Neuter before you consider giving up your rabbit for behavioral problems

Our domestic rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) are derived from an ancient line of the wild European rabbit. European rabbits live in warrens (a series of underground tunnels excavated by family groups) in an established territory. A domestic rabbit who has been abandoned in a park that looks inviting and safe to a human has been sentenced to a cruel death

- s/he has no warren in which to hide from predators or from the elements
- s/he has no family, and if there are already resident feral rabbits in the area, s/he will most likely be attacked ferociously because she is not a member of the warren.
- If s/he survives the threat of predators, cars, humans running their dogs and other immediate dangers, s/he runs a high risk of succumbing to parasites, disease or starvation.

Turning a rabbit loose in a wild area is not much different from turning a human loose, naked, in the most dangerous neighborhood in town. Don't consign your rabbit to such a fate.

A DOMESTIC RABBIT depends on human care. No matter how appealing a "natural" environment appears to a human, the most likely outcome of a rabbit turned loose there is suffering and death. Before you consider abandoning your companion rabbit to "the wild" or to a shelter when he or she matures and becomes willful and difficult to manage, give him or her a fair chance to be a true companion: have him/her spayed or neutered. You will experience one of the most delightful, intelligent, loyal, affectionate and entertaining friends you could hope to know.