

Choosing the Right Time to Neuter Your Dog

Neutering has an important role to play in the health and happiness of many of our companions but, like us humans, they are all individuals and it is worth taking time to consider the right decisions for them.

The health benefits of neutering have long been reported but we are now coming to learn that hormones can be important in helping pets cope with their environment, particularly as they grow and develop. We usually advise to wait to neuter dogs until they are at least 9 months of age so their hormones can help them mature. With large and giant breed dogs there is also some evidence that hormones have a role in bone and joint development. For this reason we would usually advise that these breeds are not neutered until they are fully grown. This would be over 12 months of age for large breeds such as Labradors and over 18 months of age for giant breeds such as Great Danes. There are obviously exceptions to this, such as in households where males and females are living closely together and there is a risk of inappropriate breeding.

At this point many owners will be considering neutering their pets for several reasons

- Avoiding unwanted litters of puppies
- Reducing the incidence of mammary tumours in females – evidence of some benefit up to 4th season in bitches
- Removing the risk of ovarian tumours in females
- Removing the risk of the serious uterine infection 'pyometra' in females
- Reducing risk of some testosterone linked prostate conditions and hernias in males
- Removing the risk of testicular tumours, especially important if there is a testicle which has been retained rather than moving into its correct position in the scrotum
- Reducing problematic behaviour patterns linked to hormones – for example male dogs straying on walks when there are unneutered females in the areas

These reasons will often lead owners to decide that neutering is the right option for their pet, however the next consideration is choosing the right time to do it. There are some patients with behaviour concerns that are not related to hormones and as such may not resolve with neutering. The field of behavioural medicine and study is a rapidly expanding area of Veterinary Science. As our understanding of dog behaviour increases we can try and work out what timing is best for each individual

When considering neutering we want to know that a dog is happy and confident and has no underlying anxiety or nervousness, especially around people or other dogs. The reason for this is that testosterone and oestrogen are a brilliant hormones for confidence and learning appropriate social interactions, especially in the early years. Many dogs we see fall into this category and we are happy to go ahead and arrange neutering. For females this will usually be 3-5 months after they have finished a season

However, in some cases our maturing companions may be showing specific behaviours such as anxiety, nervousness, aggression or humping. With these dogs it is worth considering a more in depth assessment of their behaviour before proceeding to neutering. With any nervous or timid dogs we will often discuss postponing neutering either for a few years or indefinitely if deemed appropriate. Humping behaviour may be sexually motivated, but in a lot of cases can be what we call a displacement behaviour. This is the term for a behaviour that some dogs may perform when they become overly stimulated. Possible causes for this could be over excitement, anxiety (eg if a stranger visits the house) or even frustration.

With male dogs where the role of hormones in their behaviour is unclear we have the option of a chemical implant to reduce their testosterone levels temporarily. It is important to emphasise again that these are complex decisions that need to take in all the information about each pet.

If you are unsure whether neutering is appropriate for your pet or are unsure when to arrange this please get in touch with us. Our vet Kat is studying towards a behaviour certificate and is happy to arrange a consultation to discuss any specific concerns related to this.