

ALL CREATURES ANIMAL HOSPITAL

How does neutering affect behavior?

The only behaviors that will be affected by castration are those that are under the influence of male hormones (See below). A dog's temperament, training, personality and ability to do "work" are a result of genetics and upbringing, not its male hormones. Castration does not "calm" an excitable dog, and unless a castrated male dog is overfed or under-exercised, there is no reason for it to become fat and lazy.

What is castration?

Castration or neutering of male dogs is surgical removal of the testicles (orchidectomy). The procedure involves general anesthesia. An incision is made just in front of the scrotal sac and both testicles, leaving the sac intact. Vasectomies are not performed since it is both sterilization and removal of the male hormones that provide the behavioral and medical benefits. A chemical castration agent has been recently introduced for puppies but, although these products do sterilize dogs to prevent reproduction, they may not prevent or reduce the behavioral signs that can be achieved by castration since hormone levels are still present.

Which of my dogs' behavior problems can be expected to improve following castration?

As mentioned, only those behaviors that are "driven" by male hormones can be reduced or eliminated by castration. Although the hormones are gone from the system almost immediately following castration, male behaviors may diminish quickly over a few days or gradually over a few months.

Undesirable sexual behavior: Attraction to female dogs, roaming, mounting, and masturbation can be reduced or eliminated by castration.

(a) Case studies show that for roaming there was moderate improvement in 70% of dogs with marked improvement in 40%. For mounting there was moderate improvement in 70% of dogs with marked improvement in 25%.

(b) In one study, castration led to reduced aggression toward other dogs in the house in 1/3 of cases, towards people in the family in 30% of cases, towards unfamiliar dogs in 20% of cases and towards unfamiliar people in 10% of cases.



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Urine Marking: Most adult male dogs lift their legs while urinating. Instead of emptying their bladders completely, most male dogs retain some urine to deposit on other vertical objects that they pass. Some males have such a strong desire to mark that they also mark indoors. Castration reduces marking in 80% of dogs with a marked improvement in 40%.

Aggression: Every aggressive dog should be castrated. At the very least this will prevent reproduction and passing on of any genetic traits for aggression. Castration may also reduce or eliminate some forms of aggression (i.e. those that are influenced by male hormones).

Are there any additional benefits to castration?

Medical benefits: Castration eliminates the possibility of testicular cancer and greatly reduces the chance of prostate disease, two extremely common and serious problems of older male dogs. Many older dogs that are not neutered will develop prostate disease or testicular tumors if they survive to an old enough age. Castration can also reduce the risk of perianal tumors and perineal hernias.

Population control: Perhaps the most important issue is that millions of dogs are destroyed annually at animal shelters across the United States and Canada. Neutering males is as important as spaying females when it comes to population control.

Are there any risks?

Nowadays, with the broad selection of anesthetic agents and state of the art monitoring, anesthetic or surgical complications rarely occur during a canine castration.

Most young and healthy animals recover without incident. Often, the biggest concern is not the surgery and anesthesia, but the recovery, since we need to ensure that the dog does not lick excessively at its incision line until it is fully healed. Constant monitoring, bitter tasting creams, or a protective collar, known as an Elizabethan collar, will be required if excessive licking is observed following castration. (If this is needed, please see our handout on Elizabethan collars)

When castration is being considered for an older dog, the benefits must be weighed against any risks associated with anesthetic and surgery. Since castration surgery is seldom associated with any complications, it is the anesthetic that is the primary concern. If castration is being considered as a separate procedure for a medical reason (prostatic enlargement, testicular tumors, perianal tumors), then there is a significant benefit to the dog's health, comfort and perhaps longevity, in having the castration performed. If the dog is exhibiting any undesirable behaviors that might be improved by castration (roaming, masturbation, mounting, interdog aggression, excessive sexual interest or marking), there may also be a significant benefit to be gained from castration. Although not infallible, a physical examination, a series of blood and urine tests and any additional screening that your veterinarian may feel is warranted for your dog (e.g. EKG, chest radiographs), can help to determine if your pet has any significant anesthetic risks. These tests can also help the veterinarian determine which anesthetic protocol would be safest for your pet. Since many older pets require anesthesia for other procedures (e.g. growth removal, preventive dentistry), the benefits can often be further increased, and the number of anesthetic procedures reduced by performing the castration along with the other procedure.

