

FACT OR FICTION...? DISPELLING MYTHS OF RABBIT NEUTERING

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Glen Cousquer RCVS, BVM&S, CertZooMed, explains the pros and cons of rabbit neutering and addresses some of the more common concerns

THE rabbit we know and love has evolved in response to important evolutionary pressures. The rabbit's success is based on its ability to reproduce prolifically whenever favourable circumstances arise. Winter weather conditions and the accompanying lack of food suppress the female's ovarian activity during the winter months, but for the rest of the year (January to October) rabbits will breed... well, like rabbits.

This ability was highly valued by man, leading to rabbit domestication: the rabbit was recognised as an excellent source of food and its ability to breed prolifically ensured a ready supply. However, the rabbit's qualities as a companion animal have earned it status as a much-loved family pet. However, as a household pet, the rabbit's breeding talents can cause health and behavioural problems.

This article will discuss the whys, whens and hows of neutering the pet rabbit and will seek to dispel a number of concerns and misunderstandings surrounding these procedures.

What is neutering?

Neutering involves the removal of a rabbit's reproductive organs. In the case of a female rabbit, the ovaries and uterus are removed. This procedure is commonly called a spay or

ovariohysterectomy.

In the male rabbit, the testes are removed. This procedure is called a castration.

Why neuter pet rabbits?

The demand for rabbits as pets can never keep up with the rabbit's ability to produce endless numbers of offspring. The prevention of unwanted pregnancies is, therefore, one of the most important reasons for ensuring rabbits are neutered.

Many rabbits are inaccurately sexed prior to re-homing. It is, therefore, not uncommon for owners sold two apparently same-sex rabbits to find themselves with a male and a pregnant female a few months later.

Where there is a will, there is a way – and rabbits will most definitely breed given the slightest opportunity. In view of this, neutering is strongly recommended.

Health benefits

In addition to the prevention of unwanted pregnancies, there are significant health and behavioural reasons why rabbit owners should seriously consider neutering their pets. Pet rabbits can expect to have a much longer life expectancy than farmed or wild rabbits and they may develop diseases of the genital tract.

Surgical removal of the ovaries and uterus will greatly reduce (if not eliminate) the risk of uterine tumours, infections and other problems ([Table 1](#)). Similarly, in the male rabbit, the removal of the testicles eliminates the risk of testicular cancer and infection ([Table 2](#)).

Behaviour

Rabbits demonstrate a number of sexually-driven behaviours including aggression, urine spraying, mounting and nesting. Both male and female rabbits can spray urine as a means of marking their territory. This is likely to prove undesirable in a house rabbit. The strategic deposition of small piles of faeces may also be seen. This behaviour can be expected to stop (or at least decrease) following neutering.

The sexually active buck can be expected to have a strong desire to mate and may attempt to do so with a range of animate and inanimate objects (ranging from other rabbits to dogs, cats and slippers). This behaviour is largely hormone dependent and will reduce or stop following castration.

Nesting behaviour can induce a female rabbit to chew household furniture and other objects. In

addition, a pregnant or pseudo-pregnant doe may become aggressive as she seeks to defend her territory and/or nest. This behaviour can also be reduced or eliminated following sterilisation.

Is neutering unnatural?

It is certainly true that neutering is an unnatural procedure as it prevents the rabbit from breeding and, thus, demonstrating its full repertoire of natural behaviour. However, it should be remembered that the domesticated rabbit is not kept under natural circumstances and this forces us to think carefully about how, in an unnatural environment, we can optimise the rabbit's welfare.

The pet rabbit is likely to live a long and rewarding life when protected from predation, hunger and disease and, it can be argued, these benefits far outweigh any limitations we impose on pet rabbits. Therefore, as part of our duty of care to the rabbit, we need to prevent reproductive diseases and unwanted pregnancies. In addition, reduced aggression allows rabbits of the same sex to be kept together, minimising bite wounds, while enhancing the rabbit's ability to develop a close bond with its owner. It is for these reasons that this so-called "unnatural" procedure is to be recommended.

What age should a rabbit be neutered?

The most commonly recommended age for neutering is at approximately five months of age, immediately following the onset of puberty, which may, however, vary between four and eight months of age.

This recommendation is a practical one because, at this age, surgery is least complicated and risky. Pre-pubescent rabbits have very small uterine horns that can be difficult to locate, while mature rabbits have more abdominal fat, which may also make the uterus difficult to find and remove.

Male rabbits should only be considered to be sterile after a period of four to six weeks after castration. Therefore, they should not be introduced to an entire female in the month following their neutering.

What if the rabbit lives alone?

If the rabbit is male and does not have any undesirable behavioural characteristics, it may not need neutering. The incidence of testicular cancer in male rabbits is relatively rare and would not, in itself, warrant an absolute recommendation that single male rabbits be automatically castrated.

For female rabbits, the health benefits can be significant. The incidence of reproductive disease in certain breeds of rabbit can exceed 50 per cent when they are allowed to reach old age (BSAVA, 2007), although in other breed lines it may be considerably lower. While care should be exercised

in advising rabbit owners about the reasons for neutering, the routine neutering of female rabbits is widely recommended.

Is the procedure risky?

There was a time when many vets would attribute a high anaesthetic risk to the rabbit and discourage routine surgical procedures. Advances in rabbit medicine and anaesthesia have considerably reduced this risk and there are increasing numbers of vets around the country with considerable experience in rabbit medicine and surgery.

What are the side effects?

- Postoperative anorexia and ileus – failure to provide adequate pain relief and postoperative care can result in loss of appetite and suppression of the intestinal tract's normal motility. Rabbits should ideally be eating and passing faeces before going home.
- Wound complications – rabbits often interfere with their surgical wounds. The use of internal sutures and or surgical glue is therefore recommended. Inguinal herniation (pictured above) may very rarely be seen following castration and should immediately be brought to the attention of the vet.
- Weight gain – there is a possibility that a neutered rabbit may become predisposed to weight gain. Regular monitoring of a rabbit's weight will identify any such changes and will allow the diet to be adjusted accordingly.

Conclusions

Neutering of male and female pet rabbits is to be recommended to all rabbit owners in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies and a range of health and behavioural problems.

References and further reading

- www.bsava.com/Advice/PolicyStatements/NeuteringofRabbits/tabid/162/Default.aspx
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