

Spay Surgery

- A spay is a surgical procedure in which the ovaries and uterus are surgically removed.
- Spaying prevents unwanted pregnancy and discontinues heat cycles.
- Spaying may also be performed to treat certain medical conditions, such as a uterine infection.
- When performed early in life, spaying can decrease the chance of your pet getting breast cancer.

What Is a Spay?

A spay, also known as an *ovariohysterectomy* (ovario – hyster – ectomy) is one of the most common surgical procedures performed on female dogs and cats. This surgery removes the entire uterus and both ovaries. The primary reason for performing a spay is to prevent unwanted pregnancy. However, the procedure has other uses, including treatment for uterine cancer and uterine infection.

How Is a Spay Performed?

The Presurgical Evaluation

Your veterinarian may recommend a presurgical evaluation before performing a spay on your pet. The presurgical evaluation may include a physical examination to ensure that your pet is healthy enough for surgery. Preanesthetic blood work may also be recommended. This testing is designed to help identify any problems that may increase the risks associated with surgery or anesthesia. Your veterinarian may want to use preanesthetic blood work to check for several medical conditions, including infection, anemia (a low number of red blood cells), low blood sugar, inadequate blood-clotting ability, liver disease, and kidney disease.

If your pet has any preexisting medical issues, such as a heart problem, your veterinarian may recommend additional testing to determine if any precautions are recommended or if surgery should be postponed or cancelled due to health reasons.

Sometimes, the presurgical evaluation can be performed on the day of surgery. However, some

veterinarians perform this testing a few days or weeks before the procedure is scheduled.

Surgery Day

To reduce the risk of vomiting during the procedure, it is generally recommended that pets have an empty stomach before undergoing anesthesia. Your veterinarian will likely ask you to remove your pet's food and water bowls the night before surgery and to withhold food and water on the day of surgery. If your pet eats or drinks before undergoing anesthesia, tell your veterinarian, as postponing surgery may be recommended. If your pet receives insulin or any other medications, ask your veterinarian what you should do on the day of surgery. You may be advised to adjust the medication dosage or to withhold medication for that day.

Spaying prevents unwanted pregnancy and discontinues heat cycles.

Before the surgery begins, your pet will be given anesthesia. This keeps your pet still, asleep, and completely pain free during the operation. There are many types of anesthesia; your veterinarian will choose the one that is best for your pet. Some types are given as an injection, while other anesthetics are gasses that are inhaled. During anesthesia, a small plastic tube is inserted into the patient's airway to support breathing. The tube is connected to the anesthetic gas machine to give the patient a constant flow of anesthetic gas and oxygen. During this time, your veterinary team may also connect monitoring equipment to constantly measure heart rate, breathing, and oxygen use during anesthesia.

Once asleep, the patient's abdomen is shaved and scrubbed using a germicidal solution. The area is then draped with sterile cloths that help keep the surgical area sterile. The veterinarian and veterinary

assistants then prepare for surgery through repeated handwashing with germicidal soaps and then put on sterile gowns, caps, masks, and gloves. Keeping everything sterile helps prevent infections.

The traditional spay procedure is performed through a small incision near the belly button. Some veterinarians have access to laparoscopic surgical equipment and use it to perform spay surgery. A laparoscope is a surgical device attached to a long tube (called an *endoscope*) that has a tiny camera at the tip. This sterile device is inserted into the patient's abdomen through a very small incision, and the entire spay procedure can be performed using this technology.

During the procedure, both ovaries and the uterus are located and removed. Any affected blood vessels are closed off to prevent bleeding. Whatever procedure your veterinarian decides to choose, every effort will be made to keep your pet as safe as possible during and after the procedure.

Once the ovaries and uterus have been removed, your veterinarian will double-check for any bleeding and then close the incision. Once the incision is closed, the surgical area is cleaned again, and the patient is permitted to awaken from anesthesia. Afterward, the patient is monitored in a recovery area until she is awake and stable enough to go home. Additional pain medication is generally given at this time. Some hospitals keep surgical patients overnight so they can be closely observed and monitored by hospital staff; however, other hospitals allow pets to recover at home.

At-Home Care After a Spay

Even the best and most successful surgery can result in complications if postoperative care is inadequate. Your veterinary team will review your home-care instructions before you take your pet home. Be sure to follow all instructions carefully and contact your veterinarian if you have questions or concerns after you get home. Here are just a few tips:

- **Food and water:** You may be tempted to give your pet a large meal after she returns home from being spayed. Don't! Smaller meals are generally recommended for the first day or so.
- **Stitches:** Your pet may have stitches on the outside of the skin after surgery, but some veterinarians choose to bury the stitches underneath the skin or to use surgical adhesive to close the incision. Some suture material is dissolvable and does not need to be removed, whereas other stitches need to be removed after surgery (usually in 7 to 14 days). Your veterinarian will review these details and other at-home care details before you take your pet home from surgery. Even if stitches are not present, check the incision regularly for swelling, bleeding, bruising, or discharge and report any problems to your veterinarian.
- **Protecting the incision:** Your pet should not be permitted to lick or bite the incision. This can open the incision or cause a serious infection. Your veterinarian may recommend that your pet wear an Elizabethan collar to prevent tampering with the incision and stitches. This collar is a plastic cone that fits over your pet's head (like an upside-down lamp shade) to prevent licking or biting of the surgical area.
- **Medication:** Be sure to give all medications as directed. If your pet vomits after receiving medication or has other complications, call your veterinarian.
- **Activity restriction:** Running, jumping, or using stairs should be avoided (if possible) for approximately 7 to 10 days after undergoing spay surgery. Excessive activity can cause pain, bleeding, swelling of the incision, and other complications. Even if your pet seems perfectly fine and wants to be active, continue activity restriction as recommended by your veterinarian.

What Are the Benefits of Spaying?

There are many benefits to spaying your pet. The Humane Society of the United States estimates that between three and four million unwanted pets are euthanized at shelters annually. Spaying is a reliable way to prevent unwanted pregnancy and help address

Tests and Procedures

this problem. Some dogs have health issues (such as false pregnancy) associated with heat cycles. Because spaying stops heat cycles, these problems are eliminated. Spaying can help improve certain behavioral problems, including certain forms of aggression. Spaying eliminates the risk of ovarian or uterine cancer, and

if performed early in life, it significantly reduces the risk of breast cancer.

For most pets, the benefits of spaying far outweigh the potential risks. The decision to spay or not is an important one, so be sure to discuss this health issue with your veterinarian.