

# Spaying and Neutering

by HRS

## Why spay and neuter rabbits?

- **Altered rabbits are healthier and live longer than unaltered rabbits.** The risk of reproductive cancers (ovarian, uterine, mammarian) for an unspayed female rabbit stands at is virtually eliminated by spaying your female rabbit. Your neutered male rabbit will live longer as well, given that he won't be tempted to fight with other animals (rabbits, cats, etc.) due to his sexual aggression.
- **Altered rabbits make better companions.** They are calmer, more loving, and dependable once the undeniable urge to mate has been removed. In addition, rabbits are less prone to destructive (chewing, digging) and aggressive (biting, lunging, circling, growling) behavior after surgery.
- **Avoidance of obnoxious behavior.** Unneutered male rabbits spray, and both males and females are much easier to litter train, and much more reliably trained, after they have been altered.
- **Altered rabbits won't contribute to the problem of overpopulation of rabbits.** Over 7 million adorable dogs, cats, and rabbits are killed in animal shelters in this country every year. In addition, unwanted rabbits are often abandoned in fields, parks, or on city streets to fend for themselves, where they suffer from starvation, sickness, and are easy prey to other animals or traffic accidents. Those rabbits who are sold to pet stores don't necessarily fare any better, as pet stores sell pets to *anyone* with the money to buy, and don't check on what kind of home they will go to. Many of these rabbits will be sold as snake food, or as a pet for a small child who will soon "outgrow" the rabbit.
- **Altered rabbits can safely have a friend to play with.** Rabbits are social animals and enjoy the company of other rabbits. But unless your rabbit is altered, he or she cannot have a friend, either of the opposite sex, or the same sex, due to sexual and aggressive behaviors triggered by hormones.
- **Spaying and neutering for rabbits has become a safe procedure *when performed by experienced rabbit veterinarians*.** The House Rabbit Society has had over 1000 rabbits spayed or neutered with approximately .1% mortality due to anesthesia. A knowledgeable rabbit veterinarian can spay or neuter your rabbit with very little risk to a healthy rabbit. Don't allow a veterinarian with little or no experience with rabbits to spay or neuter your rabbit. [Rabbit Vets check here](#) and [here](#).



## Is surgery safe on rabbits?

Surgery can be as safe on rabbits as on any animal. Unfortunately, the vast majority of veterinarians aren't experienced with safe rabbit surgery techniques. Don't allow a veterinarian with little or no experience with rabbits spay or neuter your rabbit. Using isofluorene as the anesthetic and appropriate surgical and after-surgery techniques, spaying and neutering of rabbits is as safe as for any other animal.



## At what age should rabbits be spayed or neutered?

Females can be spayed as soon as they sexually mature, usually around 4 months of age, but many veterinarians prefer to wait until they are 6 months old, as surgery is riskier on a younger rabbit.

Males can be neutered as soon as the testicles descend, usually around 3-1/2 months of age.

### **When is a rabbit too old to be spayed or neutered?**

Veterinarians will have their own opinions on this, but in general, after a rabbit is 6 years old, anesthetics and surgery become more risky, but that doesn't mean it can't be done. Simply consult your veterinarian regarding your rabbit's health and circumstances, and opt for pre-surgical blood work.

It is always a good idea, in a rabbit over 2 years of age, to have a very thorough health check done, including full blood work. This may be more expensive than the surgery, but it will help detect any condition that could make the surgery more risky. This is especially important if anesthetics other than isofluorene are used.

### **Can you tell if female rabbit has already been spayed?**

The probability is very high that she hasn't.

One can shave the tummy and look for a spay scar. However, when veterinarians use certain stitching techniques, there is no scar whatsoever. Hopefully, these veterinarians will tattoo the tummy to indicate the spay has been done, but otherwise, the only way of knowing is to proceed with the surgery.

### **What does the surgery cost?**

Spay/neuter costs vary tremendously in different areas of the country. The low end of the range can be as inexpensive as \$50-75 (often in spay/neuter clinics), while vets in major metropolitan areas, where rents and labor costs are very high, often charge several hundred dollars.

### **How can I find a veterinarian that can do the surgery safely?**

See our veterinary listings.

### **What kinds of questions should I ask the vet?**

- about how many rabbit clients does the veterinarian see in a year?
- how many spays/neuters OF RABBITS has the veterinarian has done in the past year?
- what was the success rate? 90% success is way too low. Every doctor, whether for animals or humans will occasionally lose a patient; usually because of an undiagnosed problem. veterinarians across the country who spay and neuter rabbits for the House Rabbit Society have lost on average less than 1/2 of 1%.
- if any were lost, what was the cause?
- does the veterinarian remove both uterus and ovaries? (they should)
- does the veterinarian do "open" or "closed" neuters? (closed is preferable—let your veterinarian explain the difference)
- is entry to the testicles made through the scrotum or the abdomen? (Entry via the abdomen unnecessarily increases the trauma for male rabbits)
- does the veterinarian require withholding of food and water prior to surgery in rabbits? (Do not do this—rabbits can't vomit, so there is no risk of that during surgery, and rabbits should never be allowed to get empty digestive tracts)

- what anesthetics are used—some veterinarians are quite successful with anesthetics other than isofluorene, but the bunny is “hung over” after surgery, which increases the probability that s/he will be slow to start eating again, which can lead to serious problems if not dealt with.
- Review the procedure (op and immediate post-op) with your vet. Ask how problems will be detected: how often will they (the veterinarian and the techs) look in on your rabbit and what will they look for?. What will they do pre-op to find any potential problems? How will they support your bun in the hours after surgery: Oxygen, warmth, quiet (barking dogs and yowling cats in the next cage are probably not helpful), and stimulation? What are they going to do to make it come out right?! Ask questions! That will get your veterinarian's attention. Let them know you're concerned and that you'll be paying attention.

### **What pre- and post-operative care should one give?**

Some rabbit people give their rabbit acidophilus for a couple of days prior to surgery, just to be certain that the digestive system is functioning in fine form. But don't change the diet in any way during this time.

After the surgery, ask your veterinarian for pain medication, especially for a spay. If you choose, continue giving acidophilus until the appetite has returned to normal.

Inspect the incision morning and evening. After a neuter, the scrotum may swell with fluids. Warm compresses will help, but it is nothing to be overly concerned about. With any sign of infection, take the rabbit to the veterinarian immediately.

After surgery, keep the environment quiet so the rabbit doesn't startle or panic, don't do anything to encourage acrobatics, but let the rabbit move around at her own pace— she knows what hurts and what doesn't

Some veterinarians keep rabbits overnight. If your veterinarian lets you bring your bunny home the first night, note the following:

- Most males come home after being neutered looking for “supper”— be sure they have pellets, water, and some good hay (good, fresh alfalfa is a good way to tempt them to nibble a bit)
- Most females want to be left alone, are not interested in eating at all, and will sit quietly in a back corner of the cage (or wherever in the house they feel they will be bothered the least). Try not to pick up or bother her much for the first 4 days. Females take it harder.

The following morning, or at latest by the next evening, it is important for the rabbit to be nibbling something. It doesn't matter what or how much, as long as she is taking in something, so the digestive tract won't shut down. If she isn't, tempt her with everything possible, and as a last resort, make a mush of rabbit pellets (1 part pellets, 2 parts water, run through blender thoroughly, add acidophilus, and feed in pea-sized bits with a feeding syringe through the side of the mouth with them sitting upright). But this should not be necessary if you give them their favorite Italian parsley, a piece of banana, dandelion green, cold, fresh greens, washed, and you hold it for them. They should start nibbling on it.

Occasionally a female will pull out her stitches. Get her stitched up again, and then belly-band her by wrapping a dish towel around her whole middle and binding that with an elastic bandage wrapped snugly over it. If she can breath normally, it isn't too tight.