RABBIT NEUTERING

Reproduction

Puberty occurs at 4-9 months with smaller breeds maturing earlier.

Gestation/pregnancy length 30-33 days. The female (doe) is fertile immediately after giving birth.

Female rabbits (like the cat and the ferret) are induced ovulators, although they do not show a regular oestrus cycle. Pseudopregnancy, which lasts 16-17 days, is easily induced by infertile matings, sexual excitement between does and stress.

Reasons for Neutering

Rabbits are social animals that need company so having your rabbit neutered is an obvious course of action to keep more than one rabbit without them fighting or causing unwanted pregnancies.

There are also other advantages:

1. Male rabbits (bucks) are usually bolder than females. They are responsive and enjoyable pets, but most are territorial and frequently spray urine, and aggression is a common problem. Neutered (castrated) males are much happier and relaxed. They can enjoy life without constantly looking for a mate and are much less aggressive. Fighting between entire male rabbits can involve attacking the scrotum and causing serious damage to the testicles. If carefully introduced they can live with a spayed female or even another neutered male. Most neutered males will stop spraying urine even if castration is performed later in life.

2. Female rabbits (does) become territorial and aggressive from sexual maturity onwards (4-6 months). They often have repeated false pregnancies, and may growl at, bite and scratch their owners as well as other rabbits. Keeping 2 females together (even if sisters) tends to make matters worse. Neutering (spaying) reduces and sometimes eliminates these behavioural problems. Spayed females are also likely to live longer as up to 70-80% of unspayed females develop uterine and mammary cancer in later life. Females who are not spayed when young and healthy may have to undergo the operation as an emergency in later life when cancer or womb infection (pyometra) develops.

NB. Neutering modifies sexual behaviour but may not abolish it altogether!

Neutering - Details of the Operation

In the past, rabbits have gained a reputation for being difficult to anaesthetise but the risk of anaesthesia has fallen significantly in recent years with the introduction of modern techniques/equipment and the inherent safety of most of the present day older rabbits and
drugs. However, those with medical problems (e.g. obesity, dental disease, or ‘snuffles’) increase the risk of surgery/neutering and should be discussed in detail with the veterinary surgeon.

Rabbits do not vomit and therefore can have access to food until shortly before anaesthesia. The rabbit should have been eating well and had no diet change for a week before surgery.

Most often the anaesthetic agent will be administered as an injection via a catheter, placed into a vein in the rabbit’s ear and then an endotracheal tube will be placed into the rabbit’s airway and a gas anaesthetic will be used to maintain anaesthesia during the operative procedure.

Overweight rabbits should lose weight prior to surgery as, apart from the practical considerations associated with carrying out a spay when there are large quantities of abdominal fat, some rabbits even despite analgesia are inappetent for some hours post-surgery and this can lead to the risk of developing hepatic lipidosis (fat deposition within the liver causing liver failure).

**Males** – Castration is a relatively minor operation that can be performed as soon as the testicles descend (10-12 weeks) but most veterinary surgeons wait until the rabbit is 4-5 months old. Under general anaesthesia, the testicles are removed via incisions just in front of the scrotum. Skin stitches may or may not be used dependent upon the surgeon’s preference. Stitches may be placed just beneath the skin’s surface to prevent operation site interference by chewing at surface stitches.

**Females** – Spaying is a bigger operation and is usually performed when the rabbit is sexually mature (i.e. at least 5 months of age). Immature females have thread like uterine horns and tiny ovaries that can be very difficult to locate. Under general anaesthesia, the operation involves removal of ovaries and uterus – an ovariohysterectomy. The abdominal operation site will be stitched with deeper muscle stitches and then most likely a layer of stitches hidden just below the skin surface.

Painkillers will be administered and also drugs to promote gut movement as a means to prevent inappetence and a sluggish gut movement post-surgery.

Food and water will be offered as soon into the post-operative recovery period as possible.

**Post-Operative Care**

Our patient should be bright and wanting to eat when ready to return home. A collar may be offered to use to prevent a rabbit interfering with the operation site. Ongoing pain relief and medications to prevent gut stasis will also be dispensed.

Male rabbits usually recover from their operation sooner but the most important thing is to ensure your rabbit is eating and be prepared to offer freshly picked grass, etc.
Usually, cage rest male rabbits for 2 days and female rabbits for 5/6 days. In both sexes, it takes 2 weeks to 2 months for the hormones to settle down after neutering.

Two rabbits of the same sex may be neutered at the same time and kept together. If a male and a female are kept together then remember that males remain fertile 2-3 weeks after castration, and that females must be kept away from males for at least 10 days after spaying. It may be safer to keep pairs separated (in adjacent cages) unless they can be strictly supervised.