

Spaying and Neutering Ferrets

Here's why your ferret needs this important surgery.

By Rene C. Gandolfi, D.V.M.

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Breeding ferrets requires expertise, patience and much work; the average pet owner is much better off not getting involved with this activity. Altering a ferret has numerous benefits. The first is aesthetic. Ferrets produce a strong, musky odor from oil glands in the skin. Spaying and neutering reduces this body odor to a great extent by decreasing the oil production, which also makes the coat less greasy and, therefore, silkier.

The second benefit of the surgery is a modification of behavior. Intact males are fairly aggressive and usually have to be housed separately from other ferrets. Neutering at 4 to 6 months will usually prevent the development of this aggressive nature.

The most important benefit of spay surgery for the female ferret is actually a lifesaving one. The ferret is an "induced ovulator." This means that like the domestic cat, a jill (an intact female) will only ovulate if she has had sexual contact with a male. The appropriate sexual stimulation results in the production of specific hormones that allow her ovary to release eggs and take her out of heat. Without this release, the ovaries will continue to secrete estrogen hormones, and the jill can remain in heat for months. Estrogen over this long period will become toxic to the bone marrow, leading to a fatal anemia. In fact, if a ferret has been in heat for more than three to four weeks, a blood count should be performed before any surgeries are performed.

Signs of Heat

The hallmark sign of heat is a swollen pink vulva that reaches maximum size about one month after the onset of estrus. Behavioral changes you might see include decreased appetite, a decrease in sleep activity and increased irritability.

It is estimated that 90 percent of all female ferrets left unbred will die during their first spring-summer after birth if they are not bred. Don't let your pet become one of the statistics.

Surgical Procedures

Neutering a male (castration) involves a quick process where the gonads (testicles) are removed, and the blood vessels and ducts leading to them are tied with sterile suture material (often an absorbable type that dissolves over time). Most hobs (an intact male) can be neutered and go home from the hospital the same day.

For females, the spay surgery (technically called an ovariectomy) involves removal of the ovaries and uterus, which are located in the ferret's abdomen. An experienced surgeon often can complete the surgery in about 15 minutes, and the pet usually goes home the same day.

A general anesthetic is administered. Additional monitoring is accomplished with an electrocardiogram and blood-pressure monitor. Some veterinarians also use a blood oxygen sensor or a constant-reading body temperature probe.

A single small incision is made in the skin of the belly near the belly button - yes, ferrets have belly buttons, too. The cut is extended through the muscle to enter the abdomen. First one ovary is located near one of the kidneys, and the blood vessels are tied and cut. The procedure is repeated for the second ovary on the other side.

Finally the main part of the uterus is located, tied and cut. The surgeon then removes the entire reproductive tract in one piece.

Recovery from surgery is fairly quick, and the patient is back to normal, dancing, chasing and hiding things within a day or two.

With all the reasons to neuter your pet and all the risks and dangers that come with not doing so, the pet ferret owner should not hesitate to have the surgery performed.