

Living with an Intact Female Dog

The BC SPCA normally requires that all cats, dogs, and rabbits receive spay or neuter surgery prior to adoption. However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, veterinarians in some communities have stopped offering elective surgical services, including spay/neuter. Therefore, it has become necessary to adopt animals out before they have been spayed or neutered, and allow owners to take them in for spay/neuter when regular vet services resume in their communities.

Living with an intact (not spayed or neutered) dog can present some challenges, outlined below. It may take several months for normal spay/neuter services to resume in our community, so adopters need to be prepared for the possibility of living with an intact animal for months.

Dog overpopulation is still an animal welfare concern in BC, so please take the earliest opportunity to have your new dog spayed when elective vet services are available again.

Age and Time of Sexual Maturity

Dogs reach sexual maturity between 5-12 months of age, which is when you may start to notice hormonally-driven behaviour problems. This is also when you need to take steps to prevent unwanted pregnancies. As the first heat can occur earlier in some cases, we recommend keeping intact male and female puppies separated from each other starting at ~4 months of age.

Special Considerations for Living with an Intact Female Dog

No Contact Between Intact Males and Females

It is impossible to keep intact males and females in the same home without a high risk of pregnancy. When female dogs come into heat, intact males can become very forceful in their attempts to reach and mate females. Heat cycles are not always obvious, and female dogs can be fertile before signs of heat are noticeable to owners. This can make it hard to keep intact male and female dogs apart during heat.

Intact Dogs are Less Welcome in Public Places

Boarding facilities, training classes, and daycares may not allow intact dogs, due to difficulties in keeping intact animals separate in such facilities.

Urine Marking

Urine marking is not common in female dogs, but it is more likely to occur when female dogs are not spayed. Unlike male dogs, female dogs usually squat when they mark. You might notice small, frequent depositions of urine in socially significant areas (indoor or outdoor). Urine marking in females is more common when they are coming into or going through a heat cycle (see below).

Indoor urine marked areas should be cleaned with an enzymatic cleaner (multiple brands, available for purchase online or in pet supply stores) per package instructions. Focusing on house training and providing frequent opportunities to eliminate outdoors can help reduce urine marking behaviour. Spaying is the most effective treatment for urine marking – over 97% of female dogs will stop problematic urine marking when spayed.

If your dog is producing more urine than usual, if urine has a pink or red colour, or if they seem to be stressed or in pain when urinating, there could be something medical going on. Contact your veterinarian.

Monitoring for pyometra

Intact female dogs can develop a life-threatening infection of the uterus called pyometra. Signs of this include reduced energy, not wanting to eat, fever, drinking a lot of water, and discharge of pus visible under the tail or on bedding. Affected dogs may have some or all of these symptoms. If you notice any of these, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Heat Cycles

Approximately twice a year (but in some cases more or less frequently), intact female dogs will have a heat cycle. The first sign most owners notice is leaking of straw coloured or blood-tinged fluid from the vulva. Some dogs are very good at keeping themselves clean when this happens, but if that's not the case for your dog you can manage this fluid by having your dog wear a special 'dog diaper/sanitary pads' when in the home. These are available from many online sources.

The 'in heat' period typically lasts 7-10 days, during which time the dog should be kept isolated from other dogs, especially intact males who will be extremely interested in her. She may be more prone to urine marking behaviour before and after this period.

Spaying during or immediately after a heat cycle is not recommended, so if your dog comes into heat before she can be spayed, note the dates and discuss with your veterinarian when booking the spay.

Because intact male dogs will be attracted from significant distances, it is not advisable to bring your female dog to any public areas such as dog parks or training classes when they are in heat. Until the heat cycle is over, best practice is to avoid contact with unfamiliar dogs.

Pregnancy

In rare cases, it is possible that an intact female dog may have been adopted while pregnant. This could happen if a dog comes into SPCA care in the early stages of pregnancy before it can be detected. If the BC SPCA knows or suspects that a pet may be pregnant, this will be discussed with adopters prior to adoption. In dogs, pregnancy lasts 58-68 days, and puppies should stay with their mothers for at least 8 weeks after birth. If you suspect your adopted pet may be unexpectedly pregnant, please contact the SPCA branch for support.

For more information, please visit: <https://spca.bc.ca/faqs/%E2%80%8Bhow-will-spaying-or-neutering-help-my-pet/>