

Living with an Intact Female Rabbit

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) rabbit 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.

Rabbit overpopulation is still a very serious animal welfare concern in BC, so please take the earliest opportunity to have your adopted rabbit spayed when elective vet services are available again.

Age and Time of Sexual Maturity

Rabbits reach sexual maturity between 3-6 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 rabbits separated from each other starting at ~2.5 months of age.

Special Considerations for Living with an Intact Female Rabbit

No Outdoor Access

It is important to keep intact female rabbits strictly indoors, unless you have a safe outdoor enclosure, or if they are trained to walk on a harness and leash. Intact female rabbits with outdoor access are at high risk of unwanted pregnancies, fighting with feral rabbits, and becoming lost due to roaming behaviour.

No Contact Between Intact Males and Females

It is very difficult to keep intact male and female rabbits in the same home without a high risk of unwanted pregnancy. When female rabbits reach sexual maturity, they are fertile and, intact males can become very forceful in their attempts to reach and mate females. When motivated, rabbits can jump to surprising heights, over barriers. Exposure to female rabbits can cause male rabbits who usually get along to fight with each other.

Urine Marking

Urine marking is not common in female rabbits, but it is more likely to occur with non-spayed females.

Urine marked areas should be cleaned with an enzymatic cleaner (multiple brands, available for purchase online or in pet supply stores) per package instructions. Spaying is the most effective treatment for urine marking – over 90% of female rabbits will stop problematic urine marking when spayed.

If your rabbit is producing more urine than usual, there is blood in the urine (note that normal rabbits can have thick, cloudy urine that can at times appear orange or brownish), or if they seem to be stressed or in pain when urinating, there could be something medical going on. Contact your veterinarian.

Humping

One embarrassing (but natural) behavior that intact rabbits sometimes engage in is humping. They may hump other animals, people, or even objects such as furniture. If this occurs, try to engage your rabbit in another activity, such as some exploration time, a food puzzle, or some rewards-based training. Spaying will resolve this behaviour.

Aggressive Behaviour

While some intact female rabbits can live together peacefully, it is more likely for aggressive behaviour to develop between intact female rabbits than spayed female rabbits. This can cause 'uncoupling' where previously bonded rabbits start to bully or fight with each other as they reach sexual maturity (3-6months). To minimize the chances of this happening, make sure your pair-housed female rabbits have large enclosures (minimum 45 sq. ft), with multiple hiding spots such as boxes or hutches so they can stay out of each other's way if needed.

If outright fighting is occurring, the safest thing to do is to separate the rabbits. It's possible (though not guaranteed) that you may be able to re-introduce these rabbits when they are both spayed. If their enclosures share a wall they may still be able to engage in safe social interactions through a barrier for safety.

Pregnancy

In rare cases, it is possible that an intact female rabbit may have been adopted while pregnant. This could happen if a rabbit 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 rabbits, pregnancy lasts 28-31 days, and kits 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/>