To Spay or Not To Spay.............My Bitch

That is the question. And what a question indeed! The spaying of female dogs is probably one of the biggest topics to do with neutering and there are lots of very good and very unreliable information out there. So what are the big questions, myths and answers here?

First of all some simple pros and cons of spaying your bitch

Pros
- No unwanted litters or unpleasant behaviours associated with being in season.
- No risk of ovarian or uterine cancer
- No risk of pyometra - did you know that un-spayed female dogs over 6 years have around a 25% risk of pyometra, a life-threatening womb infection that needs surgery to treat it. That’s quite a risk!
- Reduced risk of mammary cancer.

Cons
- Cannot ever breed - the operation cannot be reversed.
- Very small risk of complications of anaesthetic or surgery (less than 5%).
- Increased risk of obesity, however this can be prevented by the owner.
- 5% risk of urinary incontinence (treatable).
- Small increase to certain health risks, some in a small number of breeds.

If I spay my bitch it will increase health problems for her and make her fat!
NOT THAT SIMPLE
Major health problems can be significantly reduced (for example mammary cancer if the bitch is neutered before 2 and 1/2 years old) or even eliminated (ovarian or uterine cancer), whereas some increase by very small percentages (0.5 - 2%) such as the risk of cruciate ligament rupture. For some individuals there are good reasons to delay neutering to reduce some risks and we can discuss that with you.
Many neutered animals need less food once their hormones change so we advise you to decrease portion size immediately after the operation to prevent obesity.

I can spay my bitch from 6 months old
TRUE
Female dogs can be spayed any time from 6 months old. Early neutering from 8 weeks old or younger is often practised in the USA, particularly in their animal shelters prior to rehoming, and whilst the operation can be easier to perform it has
been shown to increase the risk of some health problems and is not something we recommend. Bitches can be spayed from 6 months old and there is little benefit to delaying it in most cases, although larger dogs and certain breeds may benefit. We can discuss these points with you in more detail.

**I should let my bitch have one litter, it will make her calmer and otherwise she will miss out on having puppies that she wants**

**MYTH**

There is no evidence allowing a bitch “just one” litter confers any health benefit or improvement in temperament. Pedigree dogs should undergo relevant genetic and health checks prior to breeding (such as a hip scoring and eye examination among others), and should only be mated if the test results are good for both the male and female dogs. This is a really important issue in responsible pet breeding with the aim of reducing the levels of genetic health conditions, disease and pain in our pets. And remember, there are thousands of dogs sitting in rescue shelters waiting to be homed every day, and many are destroyed. In fact allowing your bitch to mate, go through pregnancy, whelping and lactation involves a whole range of risks to mum and pups which you should be aware of before starting, including problems giving birth or needing a caesarean section, low calcium levels in the milk and mastitis to name but a few. These conditions not only cause distress to your pet but involve treatment costs as well.

**I shouldn’t spay my bitch until she has had her first season otherwise it will cause a high risk of urinary incontinence.**

**MYTH**

There is a 5% risk for all neutered female dogs to develop urinary incontinence later in life, usually after 6 years of age. This is a very treatable condition. It used to be thought that delaying spaying until after the first season would reduce that risk. Recently three large studies in 2007 (one) and 2009 (two) have disproven this and there is no difference in risk whether the operation is done before or after the first season. In fact the risk of urinary incontinence increases if the bitch is spayed late in life, her tail is docked, or she is a larger breed.

**I’m not going to breed my bitch, but I don’t want to spay her, I don’t see any point, and she won’t mate with any old dog, the operation is dangerous!**

**MYTH**

Any anaesthetic or surgery does involve a small risk to the dog. However neutering is a very safe procedure that we only carry out in well dogs and vets are extremely familiar with it. The highest risk is for infection of the skin wound, which is less than 5%. Other risks such as bleeding, wound breakdown or even anaesthetic death are extremely low. Female dogs in season and fertile are not likely to be picky about who they mate with, even closely related dogs like brothers! Did you know that when your bitch is in season you should keep her strictly on the lead at all times and ideally not walk her where other dogs go as accidents can happen more easily than you’d think. Seasons last for 3 weeks and occur twice a year during which your bitch may want to mount other dogs or try to roam looking for a mate. Also your bitch will spot blood wherever she goes, go through behaviour and appetite changes such as depression and reduced appetite, and may even suffer from a false pregnancy and produce milk. If you aren’t going to breed your female dog we would advise to neuter her.