

November 2011: Surgical Patients Need to Be Carefully Monitored

Dear Doctor: My vet is recommending that I have my 6-year-old Lab mix spayed, but the thought of putting her under anesthesia is making me nervous. Do I really need to have her spayed?

**Signed,
Beth in Plover**

This is a great question because many people share this same fear of anesthesia. First of all, let's explore the medical reason to consider having your girl spayed at this time. As a female ages, the risk of a heat cycle resulting in uterine infection increases greatly. This infection, known as a pyometra, can occur at any age; however, we tend to see it most commonly in dogs (or cats) eight years of age or older. If the uterus becomes infected with bacteria, the body will produce pus within the uterus. In most cases, the pus is trapped within the body of the uterus, causing the uterus to stretch as a result of the infection. Generally, we will see a patient that does not want to eat but is very thirsty, has no energy, and may have some drainage of pus from the vulva, along with a fever. These infections can become serious and even life-threatening very quickly. Most patients do not respond to antibiotics alone, and need emergency surgery to remove the pus-filled uterus. Since the patient is usually already debilitated from the infection, the surgery has significant risk compared to a routine spay. Depending on the amount of pus in the uterus, there is also a chance that the uterus could rupture during the surgery. Therefore, the ideal time to spay is generally by five to six years of age to avoid this serious infection.

When it comes to surgery, your concern regarding anesthesia should be taken very seriously. In the past, anesthetic complications were not uncommon. However, in recent years, the actual anesthetics that are available are much safer and more predictable. Furthermore, the ability to monitor the patient under anesthesia has improved over the past several years. Monitoring equipment should include a pulse oximeter, a carbon dioxide monitor, along with a blood pressure monitor and an ECG heart rhythm monitor. The equipment can only be of value if there is a trained surgical technician that can interpret the readings and respond appropriately to any abnormalities. It is also important that the patients have a catheter placed into a vein for most surgeries, along with continuous administration of fluids to maintain tissue perfusion and blood pressure. Most clinics also offer pre-anesthetic blood screens to evaluate the blood cell counts along with the liver, kidneys, blood proteins and blood sugars prior to the procedure.

Therefore, it is important that you do your homework prior to scheduling a surgery, as you cannot assume that all veterinarians or spay/neuter clinics or shelters will utilize the same anesthetics or monitoring procedures. In general, veterinary clinics will discount the overall fee associated with spays and neuters in an effort to encourage the public to help with population control. If you find that the surgical procedure is significantly less expensive at one location, you need to determine where they are minimizing the costs involved. Even when the fee seems appropriate, you should still ask questions before you schedule surgery for your girl. With proper pre-anesthetic evaluation, along with appropriate use of anesthetics, fluids and monitoring, the risk of a complication is significantly reduced. For more detailed information on what you should know before you

schedule surgery, visit our website at www.woodhavenanimalhealth.com/surgery-and-dental.html. Best wishes for you and your girl!