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**My pet needs a what? A Guide to Understanding Small Animal Procedures**

Have you ever thought about customizing your pet? It turns out that you would not be alone. Pet surgeries sound pretty silly and pricy on the surface level but are they actually needed, or worth it? As pet health care starts to become more established, so do normal practices within it, like spaying, neutering, declawing, ear cropping and tail docking. This is important because in America, approximately 68% of all households own at least one pet. So, should you be considering having these procedures done on your new animal? Since this field is growing so quickly, it is imperative to determine if these procedures are necessary. To do this, it is important to examine each procedure and determine if its benefits outweigh its risks and downfalls.

 **Spaying and Neutering**

Spaying and neutering are used worldwide in order to make animals more docile, and unable to reproduce. So, is it really necessary to prevent your cat or dog from reproducing? The answer is yes. Many stray small animals are becoming part of overpopulated groups which are a danger to public health. At the present time, in the U.S., there are approximately 7.6 million animals entering the shelter system each year (Kerrigan et al, 2018). Many shelters require owners to fix their animals in an attempt to lessen this number. Animal shelters want to address this issue because the excess animals are usually euthanized. Spaying a female cat or dog simply means to sterilize the animal by removal of its ovaries. Similarly, neutering is the procedure in which the testicles are removed. With spaying, many owners find a change in certain behaviors desirable. For example, one study showed that one behavior that is modified after spaying is a canine’s need to maternally guard toys and objects. After spaying the canines are less likely to guard and become aggressive. Additionally, the animal is at a higher risk of developing uterine or ovarian cancer if not spayed (O’Heare, 2003). Spaying your animal means that you will have a better relationship, as they will not be as territorial, as well as have the chance at a longer life without a high risk for ovarian or uterine cancer.

With neutering, the outcome is fairly similar. The major reasoning for neutering males is to deter bad behaviors. Male animals have the tendency to mark territory and can have the potential to become aggressive when they are still sexually intact. In male cats, after being neutered, the cats were more friendly and approachable compared to those that were not (Bonanni et al, 2019). Since owners want companions that are complacent and friendly, this option is cost effective and helps control populations of stray animals. The major downfall of these procedures is that the animal is no longer able to produce a litter of puppies or kittens. Although this seems obvious, it is important to note that small animals like cats and dogs have made a significant impact on humans and as time continues the majority of the human population will continue to want to own and cherish these animals. Domestication and ownership of these animals is important to humans, so these procedures should be utilized.

 **Declawing**

 For behavior issues in cats specifically, declawing has been a common procedure since the 1970’s . Recently there has been some push back from animal rights groups to discontinue this practice, but without it some cats may never find homes outside the shelter. Declawing is an irreversible procedure that involves removing the front claws and sometimes back claws of a cat. This involves an amputation of the tips of the bones in cats’ paws. This procedure was first used because it deters cats from being able to destroy furniture by scratching. However, scratching is instinct to cats and is completely natural. Some studies have claimed that it is so cruel to the cat because if it was ever to be let out into the wild, it could never defend itself without its claws (Martell-Moran, 2019). This is completely true and why so many veterinarians are refusing to perform this procedure now. This same study has also concluded that in some cases, it is the only way that the cat will ever be adoptable, and so in few cases it is still carried out.

**Ear Cropping and Tail Docking**

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| In this photo, A and B show dogs that have not been altered. In C and D, these dogs have cropped ears and docked tails. It is shown that animals that are altered cosmetically are perceived differently than those who are not (Fratkin and Baker, 2015). |

For many dog breeds, a common practice is ear cropping and tail docking. Once known as a way to decrease injuries during fights, now these elective procedures are used for a means to decrease ear infections, or just because the owner wants to change the appearance of the dog (Fratkin and Baker, 2015). Breeds like Doberman pinschers and boxers are often modified in this way to become more desirable and less aggressive-looking. Many find this practice to be unnecessary, and yet it is still practiced so widely.

Ear cropping is the process of removing part or the entire exterior ear of an animal, usually a dog. Afterwards, the leftover flaps can be taped into place in order to shape the ears to the owner’s digression. It is known that it is widely practiced simply for the aesthetic. Ear cropping has no benefit for the dog whatsoever. It does not decrease the likelihood for any disease, and it has not been proven that it increases hearing to a significant level. Therefore, this practice is harmful because the dog is being intentionally changed with no added health benefit. This procedure intentionally puts the dog under general anesthesia just to change a cosmetic feature, the epitome of unnecessary.

Tail docking is the process in which a dog’s tail is chopped to be very short. It can be done in two different ways. The first one is when the tail is subjected to pressure, like a rubber band, that restricts blood flow to the tail. Eventually the tail will fall off. Comparing this to if someone were to remove a toe this way, it is obvious why this is cruel. The second method is when it is surgically cut to the desired length. Again, this has not added health benefits for the dog and really should not be performed.

**Future Directions and Conclusions**

 After examining the procedures, it is clear which are recommended. Spaying and neutering are both small animal procedures that are done routinely. They both decrease the chance of developing disease, increase desirable behaviors, control populations and increase the likelihood of retention after adoption. However, it can clearly be seen that declawing, ear clipping, and tail docking are unnecessary for the health of the animal. Declawing is not the best option to get rid of unwanted behaviors for cats, and it therefore not necessary. Ear cropping and tail docking are purely cosmetic, and animals should not be subjected to them.

Banning procedures that are cruel towards animals should be a priority to animal advocates. Furthermore, lawmakers in the United States should research other countries and adapt policies. There are multiple countries around the world that have already taken this step to improve practices on animals. The United States policies surrounding animal welfare are far from acceptable and need to be addressed. This will allow for animals to be taken care of properly, and also addresses the issues of overpopulation and behavior training. Now that common small animal procedures have been examined, it is imperative to understand that only neutering and spaying are necessary, and cosmetic procedures like declawing, ear cropping and tail docking and unnecessary and therefore cruel. So, when you adopt your next forever friend, keep in mind which procedures they need, and which should be left in the past.

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