

Fostering or Adopting an Intact Female Dog

The ASPCA normally requires that all cats and dogs receive routine spay or neuter surgery prior to adoption. However, under specific circumstances, it may be necessary to place an intact animal in a foster or adoptive home. If you have taken in an intact female dog, scheduling a spay surgery with your veterinarian may take some time, depending on the availability of surgical appointments with your veterinarian. Living with an intact (not spayed or neutered) dog can present some challenges, but they are relatively easy to manage.

Dog overpopulation is still an animal welfare concern, so please take the earliest opportunity to have your new dog spayed. Spaying during or immediately after a heat cycle may impact the surgical procedure, so if your dog comes into heat before she can be spayed, note the dates and discuss with your veterinarian when scheduling the spay.

Age and Time of Sexual Maturity

On average, dogs reach sexual maturity between 5-12 months of age, which is when you may start to notice hormonally driven behavior problems. This is also when you need to take steps to prevent unwanted pregnancies. However, socialization with other dogs is critical for proper development of social behavior in young dogs so it's important that you continue to socialize your female dog, preferably with spayed females and neutered males, to minimize potential problems.

Approximately twice a year (could be more or less frequently), intact female dogs will have a heat cycle lasting roughly 21-28 days. The first signs most owners notice of their dog being "in season" is intermittent leaking of straw-colored or blood-tinged vaginal discharge and the dog's vulva becoming swollen. During this first phase (proestrus), she will likely urinate small amounts frequently (urine marking) and she may become extra affectionate with you. She may be irritable with other dogs because they will be intensely interested in sniffing her genital area. She won't be receptive to breeding during this time.

The second stage (estrus) of a female's heat is when she's fertile. Her discharge will change from bloody to clear or brownish. Her behavior toward other dogs, especially males, will change dramatically. She will tolerate dogs sniffing and licking her genitalia and she will even invite dogs to mount her by positioning her hind end in front of the other dog and moving her tail to the side, called "flagging." It is imperative that you keep your dog away from intact males during this time because a breeding can happen quickly, and you may not be able to intervene in time.

During the final stage of heat (diestrus), your dog's vulva will slowly shrink back to normal size, the discharge will stop, and she won't be interested in mating any more. Other dogs will gradually lose interest in her. At this point, some females experience what is called a false or pseudopregnancy. Her mammary glands will enlarge, and she may even produce milk. She may select a nest and "adopt" items, usually toys, and exhibit mothering behavior toward them. She may become aggressive toward other animals in the home, or even people, in her attempts to protect her "babies." This is all normal behavior and should dissipate within 14-21 days.

Special Considerations for Living with an Intact Female Dog

To protect your home from the female's discharge, you can have your dog wear a special dog diaper or sanitary pads. These are available from many online sources. Make sure to remove the diaper whenever the dog goes outside to eliminate. If your dog won't accept wearing a diaper or this isn't a viable option for you

for some other reason, speak with your veterinarian about the possibility of temporarily suppressing your dog's heat with medication (Ovaban® or Cheque®) until you are able to have her spayed.

Urine Marking

Urine marking is not common in female dogs, but if it does occur, it is more likely when female dogs are not spayed. Unlike male dogs, female dogs usually squat when they mark, although they often still raise a hind leg. Urine marking in females is more common when they are going through a heat cycle.

Be observant for behavior that precedes marking: prolonged intense sniffing of a surface, especially objects that are prominent but low, such as shoes or dog beds, or things that may naturally trigger urination, such as small plants or tufts of grass. If she's inside the home, redirect her from sniffing. If she begins to squat, interrupt the behavior by making a sound to distract her (e.g., clapping your hands) or tossing something that startles her, (e.g., car keys that land near her but don't make contact with her), before she begins to mark. Immediately take the dog to her appropriate elimination area and reward her for urinating there. Provide frequent opportunities for her to mark outdoors. If you are attempting to train the dog to use an indoor area, make sure you have incorporated a prominent surface, such as an upside-down bowl or a Hide-a-Key fake rock, so that she can raise her leg on it. You can encourage her to urinate on it by dabbing a bit of her own urine on the object.

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. If your dog is producing more urine than usual, if urine has a pink or red color, or if she seems 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.

No Contact Between Intact Males and Females

It is extremely challenging 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 with the female, breaking through barriers or even breeding the female through a wire kennel, fence, or crate door. And a successful breeding can happen very quickly, so it's best to make sure there's complete separation of the male and female until the female's heat has concluded.

If you have a neutered male in your home, be aware that he may mount and even hump your female when she's in season. Some neutered males are capable of inserting their penis, ejaculating, and even "tying" with the female. If this happens, don't panic. The dogs will separate on their own and, as long as you're certain that the male is neutered, there's no harm in the dogs engaging in "safe sex."

Intact Dogs in Public Places

As a guardian of an intact female, it is your responsibility that she not be an annoyance when out in public. If she's in season, refrain from socializing with other dogs while on walks because even females and neutered males may want to mount her. If you have to board her, make sure that you notify the boarding kennel that she's intact. Unless she's going to be completely and reliably separated from other dogs, you shouldn't leave her at a boarding facility when she's in season.