



# Golden Retriever Update

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## Study Evaluates the Effects of Early Neutering and Spaying in Golden Retrievers

A search for a quality Golden Retriever to handle in junior showmanship led Liz Bultman to breeder Rhonda Hovan. As they got acquainted by e-mails, Hovan was impressed that Bultman wanted to be sure that Hovan would not require her to neuter or spay the dog at an early age.

The possible health effects of early spaying and neutering is a topic Hovan, the research facilitator for the Golden Retriever Club of America, holds close to her heart. "For years when I looked at adult dogs that I'd bred, I saw marked physical differences between those sold as show prospects and those sold as pets," says Hovan, of Akron, Ohio, who has bred Golden Retrievers under the Faera prefix for more than 40 years. "The dogs sold as pets were tall and lanky, with no bone and pointy muzzles. I'd look at them and wonder how they got so tall."

Hovan began to realize a key difference was that the Goldens intended as show prospects were kept intact. Those sold to families as companion animals, or pets, were routinely neutered. Hovan, like most breeders, requires pet owners to spay and neuter dogs. She began noticing that the age at which dogs were spayed or neutered played a role in the way they looked as adults.

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Historically, the rationale for neutering or spaying dogs seems evident: no unwanted litters, no indiscriminate breeding by ill-informed owners, no bitches coming into season, and reduced aggression and roaming tendencies in males. However, recent findings give breeders reasons to think twice about the age recommendations they give puppy buyers for spaying and neutering pets.

Among the concerns associated with spaying or neutering prior to sexual maturity are increased risks of hip dysplasia and torn cruciate ligaments, possibly decreased life span, some evidence for increased incidence of hypothyroidism, hemangiosarcoma and osteosarcoma. On the flip side is concern that intact bitches are at risk for mammary cancer. (See Health Considerations of Early Spay and Neuter Surgeries on page 2.)

### Beyond Behavioral Changes

The health effects of neutering and spaying on Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers has been the focus of a recent study. Comparing data on disease incidence and a dog's reproductive status, the researchers have documented correlations that go beyond behavioral changes. The data analysis continues, with publication in a peer-reviewed journal expected in 2012.

LEAD INVESTIGATOR - BENJAMIN HART

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diagnoses and tests performed on 789 Golden Retrievers and 2,018 Labrador Retrievers.

"We knew that we needed the research to be breed-specific, rather than generalizing across breeds," Hart says. "We chose Golden and Labrador retrievers because they are popular breeds that would give us the large population numbers needed to generate data for a solid analysis."

One resourceful tool was published results from a national health survey conducted in 1998 by the Golden Retriever Foundation and the Golden Retriever Club of America. The comprehensive questionnaire gathered information from club members via mailed surveys, with the results posted on the parent club website ([www.grca.org](http://www.grca.org)). The database included information about 1,444 Golden Retrievers from 746 respondents.

A clinical animal behaviorist, Hart has devoted his career to studying the behavioral effects of castration on dogs, cats and horses. "Behavioral issues, particularly in males, are often cited as a reason to neuter early," he says. "As far as we know, in all the animals we examined scientifically, the age of neutering makes little difference whether a behavior is changed. Only about 25 to 30 percent of the dogs we studied show a major change in behavior after neutering."

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