

mother, a board-certified canine and feline practitioner with a large number of Golden Retriever clients, Bultman presented her concerns to Hovan. The junior handler explained that early spay and neuter surgeries may contribute to cruciate ligament and other orthopedic injuries.

Her mother, Terri Hartung, D.V.M., DABVP, who practices at the Redmond-Fall City Animal Hospital in Redmond, Wash., says, "I remember when people allowed a bitch to have one heat before spaying her. Then, people began neutering young puppies, and now most people seem to have settled on the age of 6 months for neutering or spaying. A balance needs to be established about what is best for an individual dog."

D.V.M., Ph.D., DACVB, distinguished professor emeritus in the Department of Anatomy, Physiology and Cell Biology at the University of California-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, says, "The time had come to examine the biological and disease-related issues associated with neutering. There is much misconception related to the impact neutering has on an animal and whether the age of neutering makes a difference."

The study, which was funded by the AKC Canine Health Foundation, tapped into disease epidemiology data from the national parent breed clubs and the Foundation. The veterinary database at the University of California-Davis Veterinary Teaching Hospital provided information about

An Individual Basis

In her veterinary practice, Hartung takes time to learn about the lifestyle and goals of pet owners. She estimates that among her clients with large breeds, about 75 percent of male dogs are neutered after 1 year of age and 50 percent of bitches after their first heat.

"I lean toward neutering dogs younger when I think there is risk of an accidental litter or if the temperament of the dog warrants it," she says. "People who enjoy activities like going to dog parks don't want to sit out during a bitch's heat cycle. For these clients, I emphasize the important of practicing obesity prevention.

"I also urge owners to regularly do breast exams on bitches through-

Continued on page 2

Early Neutering and Spaying

continued from page 1

out life so mammary growths can be detected when they are tiny. In countries where most bitches are left unspayed, the statistics are clear that intact bitches are at increased risk for mammary cancer. The question is how does spaying at 12 months, which is very different from leaving a bitch intact throughout life, alter the risk?"

Hartung's recommendation for people who compete in sports with their dogs is to wait until a dog is older. "There is quite a bit of orthopedic data and anecdotal information about the potential ill effect of early neutering on performance dogs," she says. "Agility is huge in our area. I advise people to wait."

Hovan, too, supports waiting to spay bitches until after their first heat cycle and waiting to neuter males until they

are between 12 and 24 months of age. After researching the topic, Hovan wrote a reference-supported article, titled "Deciding Whether and When to Neuter a Golden Retriever," which she shares with puppy buyers and suggests that they share with their veterinarians.

"Most buyers are surprised when I point out the risks and benefits," Hovan says. "I have a discussion with them in which I tie into my health guarantee the age of neutering, exercise recommendations and target weights."

Hovan notes that while waiting past 6 months of age to spay or neuter a pet puppy may be contrary to recommendations by many pet welfare organizations, it works best for her and her Faera Golden Retrievers sold to families as pets. "In my view, it comes down to the careful selection of puppy buyers, providing education and follow-up with owners to be

sure they make the right decision for their Golden Retriever puppy and themselves," she says.

More research is needed to document the health effects of early spaying and neutering, Hartung says. "The reason people get different recommendations is because veterinarians try to weight their own experiences with incomplete and sometimes conflicting studies, anecdotes and the particular situations of their own clientele," she says. "I welcome more hard data on this topic." ■

Purina appreciates the support of the Golden Retriever Club of America and particularly Rhonda Hovan, the GRCA research facilitator, in helping to identify topics for the *Purina Pro Club Golden Retriever Update* newsletter.