

Case of the Missing Hormones

Urinary Incontinence in the Spayed Female

From The Whole Dog Journal

Incontinence in spayed females is fairly common. The problem is caused by a lack of estrogen, which, of course, was brought about by the spay surgery.

Many people assume that when females are spayed, the veterinarian simply "ties the tubes", that is, cuts and ties off the fallopian tubes so that the ovum cannot travel from the ovaries, down the fallopian tubes, and become fertilized. Actually, the veterinarian removes the ovaries and usually, the uterus, too. The reason for this is that you not only want the female to become incapable of becoming pregnant, but also, you want her not to exhibit symptoms of heat. The ovaries are where the majority of estrogen is produced. If you simply tie the fallopian tubes, the dog is still subject to the behavioral changes caused by the cyclic changes in estrogen levels. If you remove the ovaries, the center of estrogen production, the dog stops coming into heat.

But estrogen plays a significant role in maintaining the tonal quality of the urethra and the neck of the bladder. Without the estrogen, some dogs lose enough tonal quality that they can't quite keep themselves from leaking. (This same phenomenon is why some elderly women suffer incontinence, post menopause: without estrogen, the tissues become inelastic.) The adrenal glands also produce a small amount of estrogen, and I would venture a guess that in the dogs who suffer incontinence, the adrenals produce a lower than usual amount of estrogen.

It used to be that the recommended treatment for incontinence in spayed females was to initiate hormone replacement therapy. However, this approach has the potential for causing more untoward symptoms than it solves. Namely, the dogs come back into heat; they exhibit all the signs we're so not fond of! If you wanted to use the hormone replacement therapy, I would suggest enlisting the aid of a really good endocrinologist to help you dial in the dosage as precisely as possible.

I wish I could say that natural medicine has a great solution for the problem, but if it does, I haven't found it yet. I've heard about all kinds of approaches, and sometimes I get lucky, and one of the approaches works, but it seems to be a very individual thing.

Sometimes, a glandular supplement seems to play a role in solving the problem. I happen to like the Standard Process line of supplements, and I have had some success with some dogs with their "Cataplex F", a female glandular supplement. I have also had some clients report success with acupuncture on some of the acupuncture points that affect the reproductive system. One always thinks of Bladder 23, which is an association point for the kidneys and the whole reproductive system.

My favorite remedy is not from the holistic world, but then, it doesn't cause as many side effects as the hormone replacement therapy. I use a drug call phenylpropanolamine, a decongestant. It stimulates the part of the nervous system that controls the smooth muscles and glands. It affects the alpha receptors with the mucosa of the respiratory tract, and the mucosa of the vaginal tract as well, helping the dog tighten and control the bladder muscles better.

You can purchase this drug inexpensively over the counter, and it doesn't cause any significant side effects that I've seen. Ask your vet about the dosage for your dog, and good luck.