

VULVOPLASTY:**“Let the sun shine in...”****Overview—“I don’t understand what a VULVOPLASTY is ; please help me understand the condition and the treatment.”**

An anatomic abnormality, most commonly seen in dogs, is the “tucked vulva”. What this means is the opening to the female urinary/genital tract, the vulva, is hidden (or tucked) into excessive folds of skin, creating a chronically moist ring of skin that can become superficially infected and raw. The higher than normal population of skin bacteria create the “perfect storm” for recurrent bladder infections from bacteria ascending (“crawling back up”) the urethra, the opening of which lies just inside the vulvar opening.

The **VULVOPLASTY** procedure is a relatively simple, superficial skin procedure that “artistically” removes excessive skin to better expose the area around the vulva. Taking away these deep folds allow the area to dry out and substantially reduces the skin infection that often smolders deep in the crevices. When the skin is clean and dry, the raw painful irritation subsides, making dogs more comfortable and less inclined to self-clean (i.e. lick) incessantly. Once the skin is healthy, recurrent bladder infections, if caused by these skin fold infections will be reduced or eliminated.

“Why is this procedure being recommended for my pet?”

An exam of the vulvar region will reveal an excessively tucked vulva and fold “dermatitis” (skin inflammation/infection). If your pet is exhibiting excessive self-cleaning or has recurrent bladder infections, treating the skin fold dermatitis (conservatively or surgically) may be the next step.

“What options do I have to treat my pet’s condition?”

For minor vulvar fold dermatitis, topical skin cleaning may be all that is necessary. Your primary care veterinarian will recommend the best antiseptic/astringent cleaners and a routine for care. Identifying low-grade or subtle urinary incontinence is essential for successful maintenance of a healthy vulvar skin region.

For more significantly abnormal anatomy, the **VULVOPLASTY** procedure can eliminate excessive folds and allow the vulvar region to remain clean and dry.

“What postoperative complications do I need to know and understand when considering this surgery?”

The vulvoplasty is a skin surgery. Excess skin will be removed, and the incision will be sutured/sewn closed. Three things are challenging to successful healing of vulvoplasty incisions—1) The skin is inflamed and/or infected; healing without infection can be challenging. We use both topical and oral antibiotics to optimize healing postoperatively. 2) The skin edges are under tension when excess skin is removed and when patients move or sit down. Given the challenging location, we are not able to bandage or protect the incision very well. 3) Surgery in this location is uncomfortable, and animals prefer to take care of things themselves by licking the wounds postoperatively. Strict restriction of access to the surgery site until healed, is necessary. Experimenting with restrictive collar devices (like an E-collar) as well as coverups (like human boxer shorts) will help you find the best option for postoperative protection of the surgical area for 2-3 wks.

If any of these three problems delay incision healing, it is possible to develop a wound infection or incision dehiscence (“pulling apart”). Both of these outcomes are manageable, but may require additional medications, additional sedation for treatment or additional “touch up” surgery.

“Are there situations when the surgical outcome is not what we hoped it would be?”

Chronic, low-grade urinary incontinence (“leaking”) is often unnoticed but may be an additional cause of excessive vulvar fold moisture and skin infection. Identifying and treating incontinence may be an additional step necessary toward solving skin irritation/infection and recurrent bladder infections.

“How is my pet’s life and lifestyle likely to change after this procedure?”

Once things heal, there are no restrictions to lifestyle.

“Are there things I can do to prepare myself, my home and/or my pet for this procedure?”

Planning for the postoperative requirement to prevent licking/chewing of the surgery site is helpful. Try on different collar type devices and test out different clothing-coverup options so you are best prepared before your pet comes home postoperatively and is uncomfortable.

Outpatient surgery and anesthesia can be uncomfortable, painful, disorienting, and frustrating experiences for animals; watching your pet work through the early

postoperative period and recover from anesthesia and pain medications can be worrisome, scary and frustrating for pet owners. The vast majority of the time this period of difficulty is brief, and *your pet is actually more comfortable and secure at home with you.*

Sometimes it doesn't feel like that at two in the morning when your pet is anxious and not consolable, and you are unsure of what to do. You always have the option of transporting your pet to a 24-hour veterinary facility postoperatively. If you do not want to have your pet home in the first few days postoperatively, please advise your primary care veterinary staff. They will provide contact information for a local 24-hour veterinary facility and help get an estimate for the ongoing care.

It is important that you have proper expectations about this procedure; your experience and you pet's outcome will benefit greatly. Please discuss this information with your veterinarian when working through the decision-making process regarding the **VULVOPLASTY** procedure.

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