

## OVARIAN REMNANT SYNDROME: But I thought she was spayed?!



**Overview—“I don’t understand what Ovarian Remnant Syndrome is ; please help me understand the condition and the treatment.”**

It seems pretty straight forward, doesn’t it? We decide to have our pet spayed. To do so means to have the ovaries and (commonly) most of the uterus removed to prevent hormonal cycles (“heat cycles”), pregnancy, behavioral disruptions, and life-threatening uterine infections. *Now we are seeing our pet go through hormonal cycles, behavioral disruptions and maybe even a uterine infection (“stump pyometra”).*

One of the causes might be that there remains a tiny bit of ovary tissue (it doesn’t take much...just a few cells) that is producing all of the same hormones as a full-sized ovary. These hormones are causing the physical signs of being “in heat” (bloody vaginal discharge), the behavioral signs of being “in heat” (vocalizing, attracting males) and the uterine tissue signs of being “in heat” (this is more technical, but an entire uterus or a tiny bit of uterus will both act the same under the influence of the ovary hormones (without these hormones, any type of uterus will just sit there quietly.))

Well, I thought she was spayed? Didn’t all of both (two) ovaries get removed with surgery? Well, yes, that was the goal. 99.9x out of 100, that is the case. Not all ovaries are created equal, not all spay procedures are created equal, not all veterinarians are created equal, not all patients are created equal. Things happen that result in a remnant of ovarian tissue still present and active in the body. It is human nature to want to know how that “error” could happen. I will tell you with honesty and humility that that question (“how did this happen!?”) is literally unanswerable. It is unknowable.

I have seen cats with ovarian tissues, tiny little rafts of tissue, that are not “in” the ovary proper. Whose fault is that if those tiny bits are missed in a “routine” spay? The cat’s fault? She was made wrong? The owners fault because the cat is so obese, and surgery is highly complicated? The veterinarians fault because they didn’t wear their magnifying glasses to do the routine procedure? I again am being honest and humble in suggesting these scenarios; I am not being flippant. Ovarian remnants very occasionally occur. They occur in dogs and cats. They occur after very experienced veterinarians and very new veterinarians do spay procedures. They occur in young animal spays and older animal spays. They occur in skinny kittens and obese giant breed dogs. They occur in patients spayed “at the shelter” and those spayed in private practice.

Again, it is human nature to want to apportion fault so we can apportion who pays what to get the abnormality corrected. How you navigate that question is up to you because your pet and their illnesses are your responsibility. The medical diagnosis has a clear recommendation (surgical exploratory to look for and remove a remnant), but the practical and transactional management will be uncomfortable for all involved for the reasons mentioned above.

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

If your pet has demonstrated typical signs of being “in heat” and laboratory samples (blood tests or vaginal swabs) support the idea that their body is under the influence of ovarian hormones, then going to look for a remnant of ovarian tissue is the next step. How we go look has two approaches.

One is to look with advanced imaging like ultrasound or CT/MRI. The other approach is to look “with the naked eye” through a surgical exploratory of the abdomen. The benefits of the imaging tests are that they are one more confirmation of the diagnosis and where is the remnant literally...specifically. The benefits of the surgical exploratory is that if/when we spy the remnant, we can immediately take it out with the same anesthesia episode (2 for 1). The drawback of the tests are cost and delay and no treatment built in. The drawback of surgery-only is obvious if we “can’t find it” to remove it.

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

If the diagnosis is an ovarian remnant, then removing it surgically is the only treatment. There are no medications that are helpful to treat this condition. No treatment is an option, but the hormonal influence will remain (i.e. heat cycles, risk of uterus infection, etc.)

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

The surgical procedure is much like a big spay procedure. The incision on the belly will be a bit larger to allow us to look all over. Complications are thus related to the incision, with very uncommon incision infections or problems.

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

As mentioned above, if we are unable to find any tissue that looks like (or biopsies like) ovarian tissue, then we have not solved the hormonal problem. This outcome would require advanced imaging ideally, to help hunt down where the tissue is specifically. It is more common than not to find the abnormal tissue. It is the rare case that more tests are needed after surgical exploratory.

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

If the hormonally active ovarian tissues are removed, your pet will return to normal/typical behavior and physical attributes of a spayed pet.

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

Your pet will exhibit the hormonal signs of heat for a few weeks after successful surgery. Continuing to plan for this is helpful—do not allow access to male dogs/cats; expect some behavioral signs (vocalizing) and some physical signs (vaginal discharge, mammary enlargement) to persist for a few weeks.

**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 your pet's outcome will benefit greatly. Please discuss this information with your veterinarian when working through the decision-making process regarding **Ovarian Remnant Syndrome**.

**Lara Rasmussen, DVM, MS**

Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Surgery

DIRECT VETERINARY SURGERY, LLC