

Spay a Nursing Mother Rabbit ... or Not

Introduction

A female rabbit can get pregnant the second after she gives birth to the last kit in the litter. Thus, if a male is present during birth, the female can become pregnant again. This is bad for the health of the female & also for her first & second litters. There is not a good way to tell if a rabbit is pregnant. The gestation period for rabbits is 28 to 30 days.

Sometimes a mom & newborns are dropped off at a shelter. There may be no information as to the situation of the birth. Thus, it is possible the female is pregnant with a second litter. In this situation, the decision has to be made as to whether to spay her while she's nursing the first litter in order to prevent a second litter (assuming she's pregnant), or to let her have her second litter. Here are some things to consider.

Spaying a Nursing Mother

Spaying a nursing mom is a very high risk surgery. Since she is producing milk, there is a lot of blood flow in the area. There will be a lot of blood loss. Only a surgeon with experience in this type of surgery & that is highly skilled should do this operation.

If the mom is to be spayed, the first litter should be at least 2 weeks old. This way, if the mom does not make it, the babies are beyond the most critical stage. You should not spay her if the developing fetuses are more than 3.5 weeks old. At that age, they are viable & doing a spay is emotionally difficult for all involved.

If the mom is to be spayed, there are different opinions about what to do with the litter. One prominent opinion is that the mom should be kept with her litter up until the moment of the operation (i.e., bring the babies with her to the hospital). After she has come out of the anesthesia, she should be immediately put back with her litter.

A lesser used opinion is to separate the mom & litter 3 days before the surgery & keep them apart another 3 days after, hand feeding the babies during that time. At this point, she will probably have no milk & the babies will probably lose their suckling response so they probably will not nurse after that & will continue to need hand feeding. That is why this option is usually not used.

Post-op, the mom should be monitored frequently by a knowledgeable caregiver. She should be kept warm & hydrated. Eating, drinking & eliminating should be monitored to make sure she is doing all of this normally. The mom will be nursing her litter after surgery, which will be very painful for her.

Rabbits are sometimes given pain medications after surgery. When a nursing mom is given medicine, the medicine can get into the milk, which the babies then drink. If you do the surgery, be sure to ask the vet if pain medications should be given to the mom.

If the mom does not survive, you will now have to hand feed the litter. This is not nearly as good as having mother's milk. It is also very time consuming for the caregiver & fraught with peril in its own right.

Allowing a Second Litter

If the second litter is allowed to be born, the first litter will be about 4 weeks old. While it's best to allow babies to nurse for longer than this, if a second litter is born, the first litter must be removed from the mom, since the mom will not have enough milk for both litters. The first litter will then have to be fed by hand, which is extra work for the caregiver & not as good nutritionally for the babies.

If the second litter is allowed to be born, the mom will then have had 2 litters within one month. This is very stressful for the mother. It's also bad for the first litter since they won't have mother's milk for as long as they should. The second litter may also have problems, as the mother's resources were divided between producing milk for the first litter & developing the second litter at the same time.

Summary

When making a decision, the health of the mom should have top consideration. A spay while nursing is an extremely high risk surgery & the mom may not make it. Allowing a second litter to be born is stressful for the rabbits, but is usually not life threatening.

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