

A hernia is a defect or "hole" in the body wall (abdomen). This hole in the abdomen allows the protrusion of abdominal contents (i.e. fat or intestine). One type of abdominal hernia (and the most common) is the umbilical hernia. This type of hernia is more common in females than males. It is important to note that umbilical hernias can occur in male or female in any breed of dog.

There are two main schools of thought when considering the "cause" of the umbilical hernia. The first belief is that the umbilical hernia is controlled by genetics. It is believed that the hernia actually appears when the puppy is still in the womb. As a puppy develops in-utero the area where the blood vessels of the placenta (umbilical cord) enter the fetus is surrounded by a muscle. As the puppy nears birth, this muscle slowly starts to close. After the puppy is born, the muscle will grow together completely. If this closure is delayed due to trauma or does not occur, it is called a hernia. It is believed that the gene for an umbilical hernia is a recessive trait (meaning both parents carry the gene.) Because it is recessive, both parents can carry the gene and not have an umbilical hernia themselves. It is further believed that this trait requires multiple recessive genes in order to occur. Without going too far into genetics this means the trait can skip several generations and only one puppy in a litter may have the defect. At this time, the specific genes involved are unknown.

Another believed cause of an umbilical hernia can be trauma caused by the momma dog when she severs the umbilical cord from the puppy's abdomen after birth. To sever the umbilical cord the dam chews on the cord. This can be a rather rough process. At times, the momma dog can chew the cord too close to the body or rip the umbilical cord. An umbilical hernia can be a result. Due to the tearing and jarring, in some instances, the dam can "rip" the abdomen causing a hernia.

For most of my females, after they have their first litter and know what is going on, I cut the umbilical cord on each puppy to lessen the chance that trauma will cause an umbilical hernia. I have found that it is best for me to allow the dams to go through the whole "birthing process" on their first litter by themselves. Of course, I am still in the room, but I am not grabbing pups and cutting cords. Giving birth is a strange and scary experience the first time. I personally believe that when I allow "nature" to take its course the first time around, the dams are calmer and more comfortable with me messing around "back there" with the second litter. Although I always try to be nearby when we have a female near her due date, there is always the possibility that for some reason I will not be there when she goes into labor. If I just stand by and watch during the first litter and allow the dam to do what comes natural, I do not have to worry about the dam and her puppies if she goes into labor before expected or in the middle of the night. I have come to this conclusion from personal

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experience. Some may choose to disagree, but it is a personal belief that I stand behind. Nevertheless, I do have one or two females that will not allow me to touch the puppies while they are in labor...they are very protective and wont let me mess with the pups until they have all been born.

However, I digress, most umbilical hernias are small and only trap fat in the umbilical ring and cause no problems. These are called "closed" hernias and generally do not require treatment other than making sure they do not worsen (get larger). If a puppy that you were planning to breed has an umbilical hernia, you need to get the hernia fixed BEFORE the dog is impregnated. The added weight of the puppies will put stress on the dam's abdomen which could cause the hernia to become larger and cause a problem in the long run. If the hole in the abdomen enlarges, there is a chance that the dog's intestines could "fall" through the hole. If this happens, your dog's life and the lives of the puppies she is carrying could be at risk.

If you are planning to spay/neuter your puppy, then your veterinarian can fix the hernia at the same time as the sterilization. This way your puppy will only have to go under anesthesia once. Repairing the hernia during a spay/neuter is not difficult for the veterinarian. In a male dog, the vet will make an additional small incision over the hernia. The vet will then sew together the abdominal wall to close the hernia and then close the skin. With females, the vet will make a slightly larger incision than he/she would with the spay. The vet will repair the hernia and spay the dog before closing the incision. The additional charge for this "fix" should be minimal.

If you have any additional questions, feel free to contact us. We will try to be as helpful as we can. We pride ourselves in making information available for those who own or are looking to own a dog.