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Dog Tips

Never Make Your Pup Endure This Cruel, Painful Process, No Matter What

Involves cutting through muscle, tendons and seven layers of highly sensitive nerves, plus severing bone and cartilage. No wonder it's banned in so many places. Unfortunately, it's still legal and popular in this country, staunchly advocated by the AKC. Time to break ranks with their stance.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Unfortunately, in the U.S., the painful and inhumane practice of tail docking dogs continues, even though it has been banned or tightly restricted in many other countries for years
- Most American animal health and welfare organizations have taken a position against tail docking; it is primarily the American Kennel Club (AKC) and individual breeders and owners who still advocate for the procedure
- Tail docking is typically done on puppies without anesthesia; the puppies shriek and whimper in pain during and immediately after the procedure
- There can also be chronic health issues after tail docking; additionally, dogs can no longer communicate naturally using their tails
- The arguments in favor of tail docking are weak and indefensible; it's time for the AKC to adopt breed standards that eliminate the incentive for breeders and owners to surgically alter their dogs for purely cosmetic purposes

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Since dogs are born with tails, they should be allowed to keep them, don't you think? Tail docking or ear cropping, two strictly cosmetic surgeries, as well as declaws or devocalization ("debarking") are medically unnecessary, and are "for human convenience only." These procedures are cruel and unquestionably inhumane.

Tail Docking Is Still Performed Routinely in the US

Sadly, the cruel practice of tail docking remains a standard procedure in the U.S. for certain dog breeds. This, despite the fact that according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), routine tail docking is considered unacceptable by the majority of veterinarians and general public.[1]

The procedure is highly restricted or banned in many countries, including across Europe, Australia, Iceland, Israel, Norway, South Africa, Switzerland and the Virgin Islands.

In the U.K., tail docking is illegal except in the case of certain working dogs and breeds, but owners who receive an exemption from the law must be able to supply a certificate completed by the veterinarian who performed the procedure, and the dog must be microchipped.

In the U.S., both the AVMA and the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) officially oppose tail docking for cosmetic purposes. However, the American Kennel Club (AKC) remains a staunch advocate, declaring the practice is "integral to defining and preserving breed character and/or enhancing good health."[2]

Thankfully, other more open-minded organizations, such as the United Kennel Club (UKC), are supportive of including animals in their events that have not been surgically altered. It's hard to comprehend why tail docking continues as an accepted, routine practice in the U.S. given what is known about the procedure.

Puppies Undergoing Tail Docking Shriek in Pain

Tail docking is the intentional removal of a portion of a dog's tail. The tail is docked in one of two ways. One method involves putting a rubber band-type ligature around the base, which cuts off the blood supply and causes the tail to fall off in a matter of days. This is the method used by many breeders. The other method is amputation with either surgical scissors or a scalpel.

Tail docking is generally done on 2- to 10-day-old puppies, without anesthesia. The cut goes through skin, cartilage, nerve endings and bone. Proponents believe puppies do not feel pain during docking. However, opponents of tail docking disagree.

They assert that puppies, just like human babies do indeed feel pain even though their nervous systems aren't yet fully developed. In fact, a study published over 20 years ago looked at the behavior of puppies during tail docking by either scalpel or scissors. From the study abstract:

> *"All puppies vocalized intensely ('shrieking') at the time of amputation of the tail, averaging 24 shrieks (range of 5 to 33). The average number of minor vocalizations ('whimpers') made during docking was 18 (range of 2 to 46)."*[3]

Incredibly, despite repeated shrieks from each of 50 puppies, the researchers concluded that while the procedure was clearly painful, the pain was short-lived because the shrieking and whimpering stopped within a couple of minutes. Australia's Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) knowledgebase believes puppies experience as much pain as adult dogs, if not more:

> *"Evidence indicates that puppies have similar, if not increased, sensitivity to pain as adult dogs. Docking a puppy's tail involves cutting through muscles, tendons, up to seven pairs of highly sensitive nerves and severing bone and cartilage connections.*
>
> *Tail docking is usually carried out without any anaesthesia or analgesia (pain relief). Puppies give repeated intense shrieking vocalisations the moment the tail is cut off and during stitching of the wound, indicating that they experience substantial pain. Inflammation and damage to the tissues also cause ongoing pain while the wound heals. There is also the risk of infection or other complications associated with this unnecessary surgery."*[4]

The rubber ligature method, in which the blood supply to the tail is cut off by strangulation, very likely also causes considerable pain to the puppy. Envision wrapping a rubber band tightly around your toe and leaving it there until you've lost all blood flow and sensation. It's not hard to imagine the extreme discomfort you would feel.

Tail docking also presents risks to dogs' health, including excessive bleeding, infection, and necrosis or death of the tail. As veterinarian Dr. Jean Dodds explains, "... to stop infection, we give young puppies immunosuppressing antibiotics. If a mother obsesses about her puppy's injury, she may lick the wound and cause it to not heal properly."[5]

According to Dr. Dodds, chronic health issues can also develop after tail docking, including weak or atrophied pelvic muscles and incontinence.

Dogs Use Their Tails as a Primary Means of Communication

Most humans assumed that a wagging tail was nothing more than an indicator of a happy dog. But research suggests that when dogs feel stress, they tend to wag their tails to the left as a reflection of what's happening in the brain.[6] Activation of the left brain causes the tail to wag to the right; activation of the right brain produces a wag to the left.

The research shows that dogs wag to the right side when they encounter something pleasant. When they see something threatening, for example, a strange dog exhibiting dominant behaviors, they wag more to the left side. These results suggest that dogs notice another dog's tail wagging and use the information to decide whether the dog is friend or foe.

The researchers concluded that dogs aren't intentionally sending signals with their tails, but rather the tail wagging is a consequence of the inner workings of the canine brain. Tail-wagging behavior results from the way in which different emotional signals activate different parts of a dog's brain.

So now we understand that removing a dog's tail is not only painful, but can also significantly impair his ability to communicate with other dogs, as well as humans.

Tail Injury Is a Weak Argument for Tail Docking

One of the primary excuses still given for tail docking is to avoid tail injuries. However, according to the AVMA, tail injuries are rare, ranging from 0.0021% to 0.0039% in dog populations per year.

Interestingly, one study found that Lurchers, Whippets and **Greyhounds** had the greatest risk of tail injury — three breeds whose tails are not traditionally docked.[7] The same study reported that working dogs (primarily gundogs) were not at significantly greater risk of tail injury than non-working dogs.

According to the AVMA, there is no evidence to suggest that dog breeds whose tails are traditionally docked have a significant risk of tail trauma that would justify cutting off their tails. Further, based on the most current data available, around 500 dogs need to be docked to prevent one tail injury.

Tail Docking Is About Owner Preference and Breed Standards, NOT About the Health or Welfare of Dogs

Tail docking supporters point to the fact that most breed standards do not allow for undocked animals. The AKC, while it has no rules specifically requiring docking, is not likely to score an undocked show dog highly for conformation. Breed standards for docked animals establish severe penalties for undocked dogs. Dog owners who want to show their animals can feel pressured into docking in order to compete in the ring.

The ideal standards for the appearance and function of our canine companions are quite evident at birth. Dogs' tails exist for a reason, and shouldn't be viewed as excess appendages that need to be lopped off. And as the AVMA points out, the central question is whether there is sufficient justification for prophylactic (preventive) tail docking:

> *"Performing a surgical procedure for cosmetic purposes (i.e., for the sake of appearance) implies the procedure is not medically indicated. Because dogs have not been shown to derive self-esteem or pride in appearance from having their tails docked (common reasons for performing cosmetic procedures on people), there is no obvious benefit to our patients in performing this procedure.*
>
> *The only benefit that appears to be derived from cosmetic tail docking of dogs is the owner's impression of a pleasing appearance. In the opinion of the AVMA, this is insufficient justification for performing a surgical procedure."*[8]

It's time for the AKC to adopt breed standards that eliminate the incentive for breeders and owners to surgically alter their dogs for purely cosmetic purposes.

Sources and References

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