



Literature review on the welfare implications of Ear cropping in dogs

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THE ISSUE

Some breeds of dogs in the United States customarily have their ears reduced with a blade or scissors to modify their shape and, in some cases, allow a naturally drooping ear to stand upright. Cropping is performed when dogs are between 6 and 12 weeks old depending on breed and body condition. In larger breeds, after surgery the ears are positioned with tape, bandages or other devices to encourage an upright position.^{1,2,3} Well-controlled studies addressing the animal welfare implications of cropping dogs' ears do not exist. However, case studies support certain risks associated with the procedure.

WELFARE CONCERNS—RISKS

General anesthesia—Cropping should always be carried out under full anesthesia, which itself has associated risks.⁴

Postoperative care—Dogs will experience pain during healing, stretching, re-taping and bandaging, and other manipulations after surgery. Some will need their ears bandaged or taped upright for days to months, and they may be isolated from other dogs during this period.

Surgical complications—As for any incision, cropped ears may become infected. Cropped ears may also fail to stand or have a distorted shape or position potentially leading to subsequent operations.^{5,6,7}

Behavioral limitations—Ear cropping affects how dogs are perceived by people and may affect dogs' ability to effectively communicate.^{8,9,10,11}

REASONS GIVEN FOR THE PRACTICE

Animal benefits—There are no substantiated benefits associated with ear cropping for the dogs.^{10,12,13} It has been suggested that dogs with cropped ears are less likely to suffer from infections of the ear canal. Although the development of some serious infections has been linked to the presence of a heavy hanging ear¹⁴, there is no evidence that cropping prevents or successfully treats these infections. It has also been suggested that cropping avoids later ear injury¹⁵ or improves hearing, but no evidence is available to support these claims either.

Human benefits—Ear cropping produces an alert expression in dogs used for security or guard work and may contribute to the distinctive appearance of a pedigree breed related to their historic practical function.^{10,16,17}

LEGISLATION AND ACCEPTABILITY

The American Kennel Club supports owners who choose to crop: "...ear cropping, tail docking, and dewclaw removal, as described in certain breed standards, are acceptable practices integral to defining and preserving breed character and/or enhancing good health."¹⁸ However, the United Kingdom's Kennel Club "has always been against ear cropping and banned dogs with cropped ears from our events over 100 years ago."¹⁹

Many veterinary organizations, in addition to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), oppose cosmetic cropping including the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA)²⁰, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA)²¹, Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)²², and British Veterinary Association (BVA)²³. Ear

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cropping is no longer taught in colleges of veterinary medicine in the U.S. and at least one large veterinary corporation has banned the practice in their hospitals.^{10,12,24} Individual veterinarians differ in their perspectives (e.g., letters).^{15,16,25,26,27,28}

Cropping has been deemed unacceptable in the United Kingdom for more than a century and is currently prohibited in Australasia and most European and Scandinavian countries, as well as some states within the U.S. and Canadian provinces.^{10,13,23,29,30}

SUMMARY

Ear cropping is a cosmetic procedure with potential negative outcomes for the animal.

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