



Literature review on the welfare implications of
Tail docking of dogs
November 14, 2024

THE ISSUE

Some dog breed standards and traditions specify or allow the amputation of part of a dog's tail (caudectomy). Puppies' tails are docked during the first five days of life, either surgically or with a constricting band. In the United States the tails of dogs belonging to certain breeds are often docked, in both working and pet situations. Although cosmetic surgery is generally not allowed to be performed on show dogs, tail docking is an exception for breeds in which this is customary.

WELFARE CONCERNS—RISKS

The welfare and ethical issues surrounding tail docking have been extensively reviewed,^{1,2,3} but the practice has been the subject of very few controlled studies. However, there are some studies reporting on the short- or long-term consequences of the procedure or comparing the health and welfare of docked and undocked dogs.

Pain—Amputation of the dog's tail produces behaviors indicative of acute pain, although there is some debate about the sensory capacities of canine puppies to experience pain during the first week after birth.^{4,5,6} Regardless, there is evidence in many species that noxious stimuli in the perinatal period may permanently alter the normal development of the central nervous system and have negative long-term consequences including hyperalgesia and chronic neuropathic pain, potentially related to neuroma development.^{5,6,7}

Complications—As with any surgical procedure, there is potential for complications, such as excessive bleeding, infection, delayed healing and necrosis. Neuromas, which have been associated with chronic pain, may develop, but their incidence and persistence is not known.

Chronic health issues—It has been suggested that dogs whose tails are docked may have underdeveloped pelvic musculature; the evidence, however, is not conclusive. Dogs of breeds that are docked have a higher incidence of incontinence; however, this may be due to traits other than docked tails.⁸ Dogs with docked tails within some breeds may have less well-developed levator ani and coccygeus muscles.⁹

Behavioral issues—The tail of dogs is important for communication with people and other dogs. Tail behavior has been shown to provide information about emotional states and intentions.^{1,3,5,6,10,11,12,13} While the behavioral effects of tail docking have not been well studied,¹⁴ Leaver and Reimchen concluded that a longer tail length is more effective at conveying intraspecific cues than a short tail.¹⁰

REASONS GIVEN FOR THE PRACTICE

Human benefits—The primary reason for tail docking appears to be maintenance of a distinctive appearance for a particular breed, and to take part in an ongoing tradition.¹⁵

Animal benefits—There are no substantiated benefits associated with tail docking for the dogs.^{6,11,16} It has been suggested that certain breeds of dogs, or dogs used for specific purposes, have a greater incidence of tail injury. However, tail injuries are generally rare, with an incidence of 0.21 to 0.39% being reported^{17,18} in dog populations per year. In the largest study to date the incidence was 0.23%.¹⁸ Regarding specific breeds, Houlton surveyed injuries to gundogs and found undocked Springer or Cocker Spaniels were more likely to suffer from tail

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injuries.¹⁹ In a study conducted in the United Kingdom, Diesel et al¹⁸ also found Springer and Cocker Spaniels had a higher risk of injury (risk estimate 0.45% and 0.37%). Interestingly, the breeds having the greatest risk of tail injury in that study were Lurchers, Whippets and Greyhounds (risk estimate 1.22%), but there has not been a move to prophylactically dock these breeds. Other dog breeds that are not docked, such as Border Collies and Rough Collies, had a risk estimate of only 0.08%. Diesel et al¹⁸ reported that working dogs (predominantly gundogs) were not at significantly greater risk of tail injury than non-working dogs, but dogs that were kenneled were at increased risk.

It has also been suggested that accidental tail trauma to the adult dog causes more suffering than amputation early in life. However, puppies are rarely provided analgesia when their tails are docked and the short- and long-term effects of painful procedures in neonates of many species are well documented.^{5,7} Therapeutic tail docking at part of treatment for an injury would also not necessarily be as short as for cosmetic reasons, and therefore may not contribute significantly to communication issues with other dogs and people, or concerns related to muscle integrity.

Although tail docking may reduce the risk of tail injury,^{17,18,19} based on the most current data available, approximately 500 dogs need to be docked to prevent one tail injury.¹⁸ It has not been demonstrated that dog breeds whose tails are traditionally docked have a significant risk of tail trauma that would justify the docking of their tails.

ALTERNATIVES

Bobbed genetics—Several breeds of dog produce offspring with naturally short or “bobbed” tails. Bobbed genetics can be introduced, or selected for, in traditionally docked breeds. This would not, however, address the behavioral concerns.

TAIL DOCKING IN OTHER SPECIES

Tail docking is performed in other species when not doing so results in these animals having a demonstrably high risk of suffering (e.g., fly strike in sheep, tail-biting in pigs). However, even for these species the procedure is gradually being considered less acceptable or even unacceptable. Research into alternative solutions for these species is ongoing and not all keepers of these species dock preventively. Docking became less acceptable for dairy cows and horses when justifications for the practice were deemed to be insufficient.

LEGISLATION, POLICY, AND ACCEPTABILITY

Many veterinary organizations, in addition to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)²⁰, oppose cosmetic tail docking including the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA)²¹, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA)²², Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)²³, and British Veterinary Association (BVA)²⁴.

Across a range of countries, routine tail docking of dogs is considered unacceptable by most veterinarians (83 to 92%²⁵) and the general public (68 to 88%²⁶). Also, at least one large veterinary corporation has banned the practice in their hospitals.^{11,27}

In contrast, many breeders with a prior commitment to this practice remain in favor of tail docking.²⁸ The American Kennel Club considers tail docking integral to defining and preserving breed character.¹⁵

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The procedure is not permitted or is highly restricted in many countries, including most European Member States, some Canadian provinces, Australia, Iceland, Israel, Norway, South Africa, Switzerland and the Virgin Islands.^{6,16,24,22}

SUMMARY

Empirical studies of docking on the welfare of puppies and on the long-term consequences of docking, including effects on behavior, that encompass a suitable population of control dogs would be helpful in developing a consensus regarding the welfare implications of this procedure. However, as acceptance of the procedure by the veterinary community and general public appears to be low, and arguably declining, there is little impetus for further research. At this time routine tail docking has not been shown to produce demonstrable benefits for most dogs. When it is performed routinely, rather than in response to a medical need (such as tail trauma), it is considered to be cosmetic surgery with potential negative outcomes for the dogs.

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