

COSMETIC SURGERY FOR DOGS & CATS

TAIL DOCKING

Tails are usually docked on 2-10 day old puppies, without either general or local anesthesia. If the procedure is done by a veterinarian, the tail is clamped a short distance from the body, and the portion of the tail outside the clamp is cut or torn away. Many breeders dock their pups themselves using a method that has been proven to be far more painful - "banding," or tying off the tail. This stops the blood supply, which results in dry gangrene. The dead portion of the tail usually falls off about three days later. This can be likened to slamming your finger in a car door - and leaving it there.

Two cases involving home tail docking were recently reported by the Michigan Humane Society. One woman was tried and found guilty of cruelty for allowing rubber bands to become embedded in the tails of four puppies. In a similar abuse case, a four-week-old Rottweiler mix puppy's tail had been improperly rubber banded. His infected tail had to be amputated.

Puppies undergoing any method of tail-docking squeal and cry, yet advocates assert that the newborn's nervous system is unable to feel the pain. They point out that puppies immediately crawl to their mothers to nurse. But don't all hurt or frightened children immediately cry for their mommy? Moreover, research indicates that suckling causes the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain relievers, which may be a more realistic way to view the puppies' desire to nurse. Docking advocates ignore the fact that a newborn puppy simply is not capable of a wide range of responses. It is very difficult to accurately assess the degree of pain a newborn is experiencing. Just because a puppy is not actively vocalizing does not mean she isn't feeling any pain.

The pro-docking lobby claims that since puppies are less developed at birth (altricial) than, say, fawns or colts - which stand, walk and run within a very short time after birth (precocial) - their nervous systems are less sensitive, therefore tail docking is not painful. However, it is well documented in the human medical literature that newborn humans, who are also altricial, do feel pain - and neonatal pain management is taken seriously. "Clinicians believe that infants can experience pain much like adults, that [hospitalized] infants are exposed daily to painful procedures,

and that pain protection should be provided, even very prematurely born infants respond to pain," states one report from the Department of Pediatrics at the Washington University School of Medicine.

Proponents of tail docking claim that their favorite breeds "often" have their tails damaged while hunting. No statistics or percentages of dogs so damaged are given. However, explicit photos of such injuries are prominently displayed in their literature and web sites. This vague potential risk for future tail injury theoretically justifies docking the tail of every single puppy of traditionally docked breeds. It does not matter whether any particular puppy will ever be used for hunting or any other activities that carry a significant risk of tail injury. One study of 12,000 canine cases over seven years found only 47 cases of tail injuries from any cause, or about 0.003% of dogs seen at that hospital. Another survey reviewed 2,000 canine emergency cases, and turned up only three tail injuries - all of them complications from docking.

One certainly wonders about the validity of the "tail injury" argument, when sporting breeds such as Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, Irish, English and Gordon Setters, Beagles, Foxhounds, and Pointers do not have their tails docked, while Vislas, Weimeraners, German Shorthaired Pointers, and Springer, Brittany and Cocker Spaniels do. Spaniels have long, heavy, furry ears that appear more hazardous in thorny, brushy terrain or water than a long tail. Spaniels are also notorious for severe, chronic ear infections. Does it make any sense that they are allowed to keep their pendulous ears, but not their tails?

The tail injury argument also doesn't explain why Rottweilers, Dobermans, Poodles, Schnauzers and Old English Sheepdogs (as well as Australian Shepherds unfortunate enough to be born with tails instead of without), routinely have their tails docked. These working and non-sporting breeds aren't running around in the brush and woods. Old English and Aussie breeders might offer that a tail is a liability around livestock. But why isn't this so, then, for Border Collies, Shetland Sheepdogs, Australian Cattle Dogs, Great Pyrenees, or other herding breeds? The argument seems very thin when examined logically.

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