

Introduction

The docking of dogs' tails is a practice which has been carried out for centuries in order to avoid tail damage, for hygienic and other reasons. Today there are 58 traditionally docked breeds which are recognised by the United Kingdom Kennel Club.

But docking has, in recent years, come under the scrutiny of the veterinary establishment, which has condemned the practice as an 'unjustified mutilation'.

Breeders, dog owners and many veterinary surgeons disagree with this view. They believe that if docking ceased, dogs would suffer.

Docking, they say, is a perfectly humane procedure when properly carried out, and one which prevents far more distress than it causes. It is, like neutering, simply a practical animal management technique which should remain available to dog breeders and owners.



The legal position

Tail docking was, in the past, undertaken largely by dog breeders. However, in 1991 the Government amended the Veterinary Surgeons Act, thereby prohibiting the docking of dogs' tails by lay persons from 1st July 1993. Since that date only veterinary surgeons have, by law, been allowed to dock.

Following the change in the legal status of docking, the Council of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons ruled docking to be unethical "unless for therapeutic or acceptable prophylactic reasons". This ruling was subsequently tested by the College's own disciplinary process, where it was found that a vet had the right to make his own clinical judgement over docking.

Though vets have opposing views on docking, a substantial number continue to dock litters for their clients.

Is the abolition of docking demanded by Europe?

There is no European Community Directive or Regulation against docking. The only international treaty which mentions the procedure is the 1987 European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals, established by the advisory grouping of western European states, the Council of Europe.

The Convention seeks a general prohibition on the docking of tails. However, it permits exceptions "if a veterinarian considers non-curative procedures necessary either for veterinary medical reasons or for the benefit of any particular animal". Furthermore, the Convention specifically recognises the rights of nations which accept every other provision in the treaty to reserve their positions on docking. Thus even the Council of Europe accepts that differing views may reasonably be held over the matter.

Fewer than half of the 45 members of the Council of Europe have signed the Convention despite the fact that it has been in force for more than 16 years, an indication of the low degree of importance with which it is regarded by European states. Britain has neither signed nor ratified the Convention.

Why are dogs'

● To avoid tail damage

A number of working gundog breeds have to hunt game through heavy vegetation and thick brambles, where their fast tail action can easily lead to torn and bleeding tails which are painful and extremely difficult to treat. Docking the end of the tail eliminates the risk of injury.

Working terriers are docked for the same reason. In addition, terriers which are bred to hunt below ground for purposes such as fox control have their tails docked to a length which is more practical when working in a confined space.

Other non-working breeds which have an enthusiastic tail action are also liable to damage their tails, even in the home.

After docking was banned in Sweden in 1989, there was a massive increase in tail injuries amongst previously docked breeds. Within the 50 undocked pointer litters registered in that year with the Swedish Kennel Club, 38% of dogs suffered tail injury before they were 18 months old and in 1991 the number of individuals with tail injury had increased to 51% of the group.

● For reasons of hygiene

Long haired, thick coated breeds such as the Yorkshire terrier and Old English sheepdog are docked to avoid the hair around the base of the tail becoming fouled by faeces. Even with constant grooming and washing, such fouling is unpleasant. If allowed to get out of hand it can lead to severe problems of hygiene, or even flystrike and subsequent infestation by maggots.

Hygiene problems can be greatly reduced or eliminated altogether by docking.

● To maintain breed standards

Breeds which have been docked over many generations have been selected for specific qualities of build and conformation, but not for tail length, shape and carriage.

If left undocked, it is unlikely that the best dogs would carry good tails. In seeking to maintain the quality of the breeds, breeders would therefore be left with a diminished number of suitable sires and dams. The genetic pool would be reduced, greatly increasing the risk of hereditary diseases taking hold. Some breeds could even disappear for ever.



tails docked?

How is docking carried out?

There are two methods of docking. Many vets use the technique known as 'banding', in which a ligature, normally an orthodontic band, is placed in position on the puppy's tail when it is 24-96 hours old. This effectively cuts off the blood supply to the end of the tail, which comes away within 3 days.

Some vets shorten the tail by cutting. There is generally no need for stitches, but on occasions these can be used, especially with larger breeds.

Is docking cruel?

Docking is carried out when puppies are tiny. Their eyes are not yet open and long experience indicates that, carried out correctly, the procedure causes no pain or discomfort. Indeed, some puppies which are docked whilst they are sleeping do not even wake up. After docking, puppies will immediately return to their dam to feed, and there is no evidence that development or weight gain is in any way arrested by the docking procedure.

Nor does a dog which has been docked as a puppy have any problems with balance or communication.

Can adult dogs be docked?

The tail of an adult dog may not be docked for prophylactic reasons. Once a dog's eyes are open, its tail may only be shortened in order to treat injury or disease. This is reinforced by the UK Kennel Club which prevents the showing of dogs whose tails have been amputated, in whole or in part, without good reason, at an unacceptably advanced age.



If, however, tail injury occurs during adulthood, amputation may have to be carried out for therapeutic reasons. This is a major operation which requires a general anaesthetic. The dog can be seriously distressed and the healing process can be painful and protracted.

Do dog breeders want the law changed?

All responsible breeders consider the welfare of their dogs to be of the utmost importance. They recognise that docking should be carried out by competent and qualified professionals, and they therefore wish to continue to have the freedom to choose to have their litters legally docked by a registered veterinary surgeon.

But, just as farmers are permitted to dock lambs, breeders believe that there is a strong case for suitably qualified lay people to be authorised by law to dock puppies.

The Council of Docked Breeds would prefer the introduction of a Docking Register listing those who would be trained and certificated in docking.

Breeders and owners maintain that, far from improving the lot of docked breeds, the effective abolition of docking would lead to a crisis in animal welfare.

...to avoid this



Tail injury is a regular occurrence amongst undocked dogs.

It is painful and difficult to treat.



Dogs of the docked breed variety

Airedale Terrier
American Cocker Spaniel
Australian Silky Terrier
Australian Shepherd
Australian Terrier
Boerboel
Bouvier des Flandres
Boxer
Bracco Italiano
Brittany
Cane Corsa
Clumber Spaniel
Cocker Spaniel
Dobermann
English Springer Spaniel
Fell Terrier
Field Spaniel
German Shorthaired Pointer
German Wirehaired Pointer
Giant Schnauzer
Glen of Imaal Terrier
Griffon Bruxellois
Hungarian Vizsla
Irish Terrier
Italian Spinone
Jack Russell Terrier
Kerry Blue Terrier
King Charles Spaniel
Lakeland Terrier
Large Munsterlander
Lucas Terrier
Miniature Pinscher
Miniature Poodle
Miniature Schnauzer
Neopolitan Mastiff
Norfolk Terrier
Norwich Terrier
Old English Sheepdog
Patterdale Terrier
Parson Jack Russell Terrier
Pembroke Welsh Corgi
Pinscher
Polish Lowland Sheepdog
Rottweiler
Russian Black Terrier
Schipperke
Schnauzer
Sealyham Terrier
Smooth Fox Terrier
Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier
Spanish Water Dog
Standard Poodle
Sussex Spaniel
Swedish Vallhund
Toy Poodle
Weimaraner
Welsh Springer Spaniel
Welsh Terrier
Wirehaired Fox Terrier
Yorkshire Terrier

The Council of Docked Breeds

Protecting the freedom to choose

Helpline

07000 781262

Internet

www.cdb.org

