

Tail Docking

- Tail docking, also known by the term *caudectomy*, is the surgical removal of a portion of the tail.
- Surgical caudectomy can be performed for medical reasons, such as to ensure complete tumor removal or to alleviate excessive skin folds around the base of the tail.
- In most cases, tail docking is a cosmetic procedure without apparent medical benefit; it therefore remains controversial.

What Is Tail Docking?

Tail docking, also known by the term *caudectomy*, is the surgical removal of a portion of the tail.

Why Is Tail Docking Performed?

When caudectomy is performed for medical reasons, it is not referred to by the term *tail docking*. If a dog (or cat) breaks his or her tail in such a way that adequate healing is unlikely, it may be medically advantageous for the pet if part of the tail is removed. Similarly, if a pet sustains a serious wound or infection on the tail, caudectomy can have medical benefits for the pet. Caudectomy is also sometimes performed to ensure adequate removal of tumors on the tail, or to help alleviate skin infection under the tail caused by excessive skin folds.

When caudectomy is not performed for medical reasons, it is referred to as *tail docking*. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), tail docking is a cosmetic procedure. It is performed to alter a dog's physical appearance in compliance with certain breed standards, but has no proven medical benefit for the pet. Tail docking, therefore, remains a controversial procedure.

Traditionally, owners of certain working and hunting dogs (such as German short-haired pointers) had their dogs' tails docked because it was thought to reduce the chances of trauma or injury to the tail while the dog performed his or her duties. It was also thought that tail docking would help prevent a long tail from becoming soiled while the dog was

working. However, limited scientific evidence exists to support these assertions.

How Is Tail Docking Performed?

The amount of tail removed during a tail docking depends on the standard for the particular dog breed. In general, the remaining tail segment is between $\frac{1}{4}$ inch long (for a Norwich terrier, for example) and $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches long (for a giant schnauzer). Surgical separation of the bones in the tail can be performed using a scalpel. The small incision can then be stitched closed using suture material. Laser surgery or electro-surgery are also options. However, in some cases a constricting band is used.

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In most cases, tail docking is performed when puppies are between 3 and 5 days old. Local anesthesia (with or without sedation) can be used to numb the area before surgery, but the procedure is sometimes performed without it. If the surgery is not performed before the dog is 5 days old, it should be postponed until the dog is 8 to 12 weeks of age. General anesthesia is recommended if surgery is performed at that time.

If medical caudectomy is performed in an adult dog, general anesthesia is used. The amount of tail that is removed depends on the medical issue that is being treated.

What At-Home Care Is Needed Following Tail Docking?

Because tail docking is usually performed when puppies are only a few days old, before they are sold or adopted, pet owners rarely have to provide any care.

If tail docking is performed when a puppy is older (between 8 and 12 weeks old), there may still

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be a suture present at the time of purchase or adoption. If so, the puppy should be prevented from licking the area until it has healed completely. Similarly, littermates or the dam may try to lick the area, which should be prevented. If any swelling, discharge, or discoloration of the area is observed, notify your veterinarian immediately.

For older pets that have undergone caudectomy for a medical reason, there will likely be sutures present,

or the area may be bandaged to keep it clean. If sutures are present, they should be checked regularly for bleeding, swelling, or discharge. If a bandage is present, it should be checked frequently for moisture, slippage, or soiling. If the pet tries to lick the area, an Elizabethan collar may be necessary. This is a cone-shaped collar that fits over the pet's head and limits access to the rear of the body. Your veterinarian can fit your pet with the proper-sized collar if necessary.