

Ear Cropping and Tail Docking, Pros and Cons

DOG FANCY readers support alerting dog owners to ear cropping and tail docking risks.

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Ear cropping and tail docking - surgeries usually performed on dogs for cosmetic reasons - have led the American Veterinary Medical Association to discourage its members from performing the operations and the controversy could have an impact in the show ring.

The American Kennel Club, the largest breed registry in the United States, specifies docking - the amputation of part of a dog's tail - in more than 40 breeds. Veterinarians generally dock puppies within a week after birth but sometimes perform the surgery on older dogs for medical reasons, such as a tail-beater's constant fractures from whipping it against hard objects.

Cropping - the surgical reshaping of a dog's ears - may be performed to correct birth defects or damage from injury or disease, but the expensive and painful surgery is typically sought on 8- to 10-week-old pups to make their folded ears erect for conformation. Recovery requires splinting, tedious ear bandaging and pain medication.

The Schaumburg, Ill.-based AVMA recommended in 1976 that the AKC and other breed associations drop cropped ears from breed standards and eventually prohibit showing dogs with cropped ears. Tail docking is

illegal in Britain, and ear cropping is considered inhumane in England and several other European countries.

As the standards endure, the AVMA has given its member veterinarians official counseling: "Ear cropping and tail docking in dogs for cosmetic reasons are not medically indicated nor of benefit to the patient. These procedures cause pain and distress, and, as with all surgical procedures, are accompanied by inherent risks of anesthesia, blood loss and infection. Therefore, veterinarians should counsel dog owners about these matters before agreeing to perform these surgeries."

The statement does not prohibit veterinarians from performing either procedure, said Gail C. Golab, Ph.D., DVM, assistant director for education and research for the AVMA. It's intended to make owners aware of the inherent risks.

The AKC, based in New York City and Raleigh, N.C., fears animal-rights activists may cite the resolution to pursue cruelty charges against owners who have their dogs cropped or docked. It responded to the AVMA's decision in a prepared statement: "The AKC recognizes that 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. Appropriate veterinary care should be provided."