

## **Thesis summary/abstract**

This thesis aimed to discover, in depth, what tail docking of dogs is, why it is currently in practice, what the controversial opinions surrounding it are, how the opinions differ when taking into account the professionals of the field versus owners and breeders, and how it can be addressed in the future to treat our animals as humanely as possible.

Based on the surveying of South Carolinian owners, breeders, and veterinarians, it was discovered that dog tail-docking procedures are overwhelmingly used for cosmetic or aesthetic purposes, with the aim being to match breed standards. There was a disagreement amongst those surveyed on what constitutes a medical necessity to dock dogs' tails and whether matching breed standards is a substantial reason to do so. Responses varied, with a significant number of breeders and owners indicating they supported the procedure when done to match breed standards, and others indicating they are against the procedure in all cases.

Veterinarians that were surveyed had split opinions when asked why they believe the procedure is chosen— either to match breed standards or to prevent injury in working dogs, with emphasis on aesthetic, medically unnecessary purposes being over-represented amongst the two reasons. However, they agreed on the mechanism of action for docking tails, being surgical, and the age at which it should be done, being within a week of birth. Most veterinarians disagreed with banning the procedure as it could lead to dangerous botching of docked tails at home by breeders or prevention of the procedure when suggested for hunting and working dogs.

Matching breed standards has been deemed an unnecessary medical reason for docking tails by the AVMA and by veterinarians (6). However, that has not stopped the procedure from being pursued. Next steps for addressing this ethical issue is enforcing a policy by kennel clubs

that manage what a typical breed should look like that allows the breed to have their natural tails, with exceptions in cases of physical necessity– hunting and working dogs that can injure their tails on the job or breeds with predisposition to tail injuries. This comes at a cost too, however, as this is a preemptive measure with uncertainty on how many will actually injure their tails. In addition, the procedure can have negative side-effects, especially if performed improperly.

Limiting the procedure to only medically necessary instances, such as for dogs working in the armed forces or police forces, for hunting dogs, and for breeds that historically damage their tails, requires a definitive definition of what constitutes necessity, but would eliminate the procedure being done for showing purposes and to strictly match breed standards.

## Table of Contents

Introduction and Thesis Statement.....	4
Approach and Methodology.....	7
Data.....	11
Data Interpretation.....	18
Outcome and Potential Significance.....	25
Annotated Bibliography.....	28

## INTRODUCTION AND THESIS STATEMENT

“Dogs are man's best friends.” Dogs are family. We often think of our pets as furry members of our pack. These are common statements we hear all the time. For most people, when we get new puppies, we share our love for them with our friends and families. When our senior dogs pass away, we grieve like we grieve a family member. If we consider them so much of our family, why do we continue to endorse and support tail docking when medically unnecessary?

Dog tail docking is the removal of a dog's tail by amputating it (4). There are medical reasons for the surgery, but in the vast majority of cases, the procedure is elective and medically unnecessary. Through research on the demographic instances that surround and predate the decision dog owners and breeders make to dock their dogs' tails, including the ethical and moral dilemmas that surround the decision, I have reached the informed hypothesis that the procedure is done mostly for aesthetic reasons and can be regarded as medically unnecessary when done for just that. Further, it should be avoided when not done for safety or when done for just aesthetics. Specifically, research on dog breeders in South Carolina shows that they feel that they need to dock the puppies' tails before selling them, and owners follow this.

It is important to discuss and detail the ethical perceptions surrounding the decision and the reasoning for choosing to dock dogs' tails in order to convince and show that aesthetic dog tail docking should be avoided. There is an exigence for detailing the ethical perceptions of dog tail docking from veterinarians perspective as they are experts in the field, and they are the best chance for guiding owners in an informed and accurate decision.

Tail docking is the process of removing the tail of the dog. When termed “tail docking,” it is inferred that the procedure is not the result of damage or injury. The term “tail amputation”

gives the connotation that the tail is surgically removed by a veterinarian following trauma or injury to the tail. Often, for tail docking, veterinarians remove or shorten the tail of a dog at the owner's request. Whilst investigating the reasons why owners choose to dock their dogs' tails, I have discovered some reasons behind their desire to do so, whether misguided or not, as well as the possibility for long term effects for this cosmetic procedure. This was done by surveying veterinarians in South Carolina on their viewpoints on the procedure, since they are experts in the field. I asked their opinions on the issue, with a variety of questions. I also surveyed owners who seek this procedure and their opinions on it, as well as breeders who either perform the procedure themselves or advocate for it. Through this research study honed in specifically by surveying veterinarians, breeders, and owners in South Carolina, I have reached an answer to my question, "Why do owners and breeders continue to choose to put their dogs through the cosmetic procedure of docking their tail, how do we differentiate medically necessary versus unnecessary, and are there any factors that can deter the decision in medically unnecessary cases?"

Tail docking of dogs has been shown to be a common cosmetic procedure that dog owners undertake. Surveying owners and veterinarians on the issue would provide insight on why tail docking is so common, if there are any detrimental effects of the procedure, and if they can be convinced to avoid the procedure when used for cosmetic reasons alone. I propose that the majority of dog tail docking occurs for cosmetic reasons and is unethical; through surveying of owners, breeders, and veterinarians, insight can be obtained and used to differentiate medically necessary reasons for the procedure in an effort to limit the desire for elective procedures, such as tail docking, on our pets.

According to an article researching complications with dog tail docking, the procedure has historically been done for a couple of reasons– to ensure the dogs align with the long historical standard of the specific breeds, to avoid injuries to the tail, or to keep the dogs’ feces from getting stuck to the fur of breeds with a lot of hair (3). The main reason, however, is the first. A study in England proved that the percentage of dogs whose tails were actually injured was 0.23% (3). Based on this statistic, this is why I will be focusing on figuring out the reason in the greater South Carolina area for owners and breeders choosing to dock their dogs’ tails. Figuring out if it is truly done mostly for cosmetic reasons provides ammunition to further discussions on prevention of medically unnecessary procedures on pets. In another study (5), they also determined that 1 in every 50 dogs that had their tails docked would actually have had a tail injury. Dogs of certain breeds and in certain conditions, such as those working on farms, are most likely to be injured. This will be a factor that I take into consideration when surveying. In a study on issues regarding tail docking, it was proven that pain is felt by puppies, even when their tails are docked at 3 to 5 days of age and regardless of procedure mechanism (4). My research on pain felt will be included in my surveys as well to accurately depict whether proven pain deters or doesn’t affect the decision to dock tails.

I seek to figure out if the main reason owners or breeders in South Carolina choose the procedure is so that their dog conforms to breed standards. After pinpointing the most common reasons in rural and urban South Carolina areas, and presenting veterinarian opinions, I can better prove that it is most commonly unnecessary and that we as a society should move away from the practice when used for cosmetic reasons alone. Collecting reasons and the ethical perceptions people have regarding the procedure, along with professional opinions and facts

from published studies, I can provide specific reasons and hopefully convince the termination of the procedure for cosmetics.

## **APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

The scope of my research includes veterinarians in South Carolina, from different offices or areas. The survey also includes South Carolinian dog pet owners and breeders, from various parts of the state, to make sure my research covers both rural and urban areas so that my findings can be diverse enough to be applied to larger questions and issues in the future.

To analyze the reasons and perceptions behind why people believe it is ethical to dock dogs' tails, and in order to write a compelling argument, I conducted a quantitative survey. First, I surveyed owners and breeders in South Carolina. I asked a series of questions about their reasons for and perceptions about the procedure. Following that, I surveyed veterinarians in the same areas. From the data and responses I collect, I used the information to collectively deduce why the procedure is done, what veterinarians recommend, and if there is a common reason or perception. It is important to understand why they are choosing the procedure in order to argue that it should be stopped, considering it is, in the majority of cases, an elective procedure and not medically necessary. Using this information, I can compile a thorough and subjective argument about the ethical perceptions of the tail docking procedure. These survey responses serve as my primary research, and will be paired with secondary research in published papers by other experts in the field.

For the survey, I had dog owners and breeders answer the following questions:

- Do you live in South Carolina / are you from South Carolina?

- Have you owned or purchased a dog while living in SC?
- What breed/breeds did you get/do you have?
- How old are you?
- What city/town in South Carolina do you currently live in?
- How would you classify where you live?
- Do you agree with docking dogs' tails?
- Would you dock your own puppy's tail/have its tail docked?
- What age do you think is appropriate for a dog to have their tail docked?
- Have you ever had your dog's tail docked through your own will/at your request?
- Did you ever purchase a dog from a breeder?
- If you have purchased a dog from a breeder, did they give you the option whether you wanted to dock the tail?
- If you have purchased a dog from a breeder and they gave you the option whether you wanted to dock the tail, did you choose to dock the tail?
- If you found out it causes the puppy brief pain, would you still plan to do it?
- If you found out it could increase the chances of certain issues in the future, would you still plan to do it?
- If you have chosen the procedure, what are your reasons?
- If you are a breeder and you dock the tails of the litter, what are the reasons?
- If you are a breeder and you do NOT dock the tails, what are the reasons?
- If you are a breeder, how do you dock the tails? Mechanism? Yourself? Veterinarian?
- Historically, docking tails was to prevent injury in working dog. In your opinion, why do people still want their dogs' tails docked? If you say safety, safety for/from what?



- Is "matching breed standards" an appropriate reason to have a dog's tail docked/to undergo a medically unnecessary procedure? If yes, please explain why.

For the survey of veterinarians, I asked their opinion on the procedure. Doctors of Veterinary Medicine are professionals in the field. Their training and knowledge makes them experts in the subject, and I believe that surveying a collection of veterinarians uniquely provides me with accurate and substantial information to use in my research and in my argument.

For this survey, I had the veterinarians answer the following questions:

- Where did you attend Veterinary Medical College?
- How old are you?
- Do you live in South Carolina/practice in South Carolina?
- How long have you practiced veterinary medicine in South Carolina?
- What year did you graduate from Vet school?
- Do you personally agree with dog tail docking? (not referring to tail amputations due to accidents/happy tail/injury)
- If an owner insists on having the dogs' tail docked, what age should it be done at?
- What mechanism for tail docking do you prefer most?
- What mechanism for tail docking do you prefer least?
- What is the appropriate length to dock the tail, if someone chooses the procedure?
- In an ideal world where people wouldn't do it unsafely, would you agree with banning the process?

- What is your opinion on banning dog tail docking (ie. the European laws)? Do you think it would interfere with medically necessary tail docking? How do you differentiate "medically necessary" from "medically unnecessary"?
- Would you ever tell an owner 'no' to docking the tail?
- Do you believe, in general, that it is medically unnecessary / a cosmetic procedure?
- If you believe it is medically necessary, what breeds and why?
- Are there any adverse side effects of the procedure? If yes, please explain.
- Are there any benefits or positive outcomes to the procedure? If yes, please explain.
- Why do you believe, in your own opinion, owners want to dock their dogs' tails?
- Why do you believe, in your own opinion, breeders choose to dock dogs' tails before selling them?
- Historically, tails were docked in working dogs to prevent injury. Considering most dogs that have the procedure done now aren't working dogs like in the past, why do some owners still want to do it for safety measures, in your opinion?
- What is your opinion on the "banding" method that many breeders use to dock their puppies' tails?

I selected this method of surveying for data collection because I believe it is the most accurate and reliable way to get information on the perceptions of the procedure in my research location. I followed a quantitative analysis as my form of a methodological model to collect my primary data. My secondary research includes analyzing and referencing published papers from online databases such as veterinary medical journals. To analyze the information from the published papers I plan to use, I categorized the papers as either for dog tail docking or against

dog tail docking. This way I can use the sources in my analyses and arguments to ensure I am being unbiased. Doing this, the paper will be split between analyzing the survey data, conglomerating the data with published papers' data, and then formulating an argument on the ethical perceptions using the data. My expectation was to learn the ethical perceptions and reasons that owners and breeders choose to proceed with the procedure. Analyzing this data and utilizing published papers from experts, I can formulate an organized argument.

## DATA

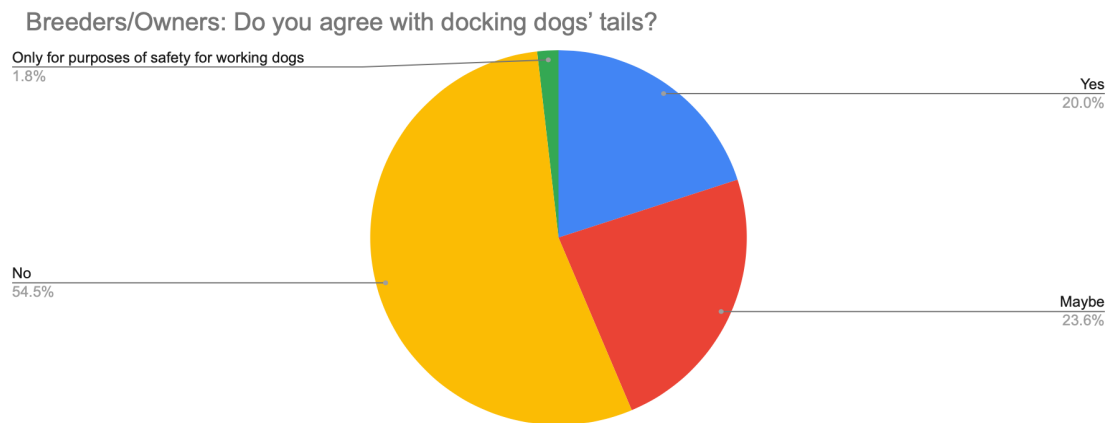


Chart 1: Visual depiction showing responses to whether the breeders or owners agree with docking of dogs' tails.

Breeders/Owners: If you have chosen the procedure, what were your reasons?

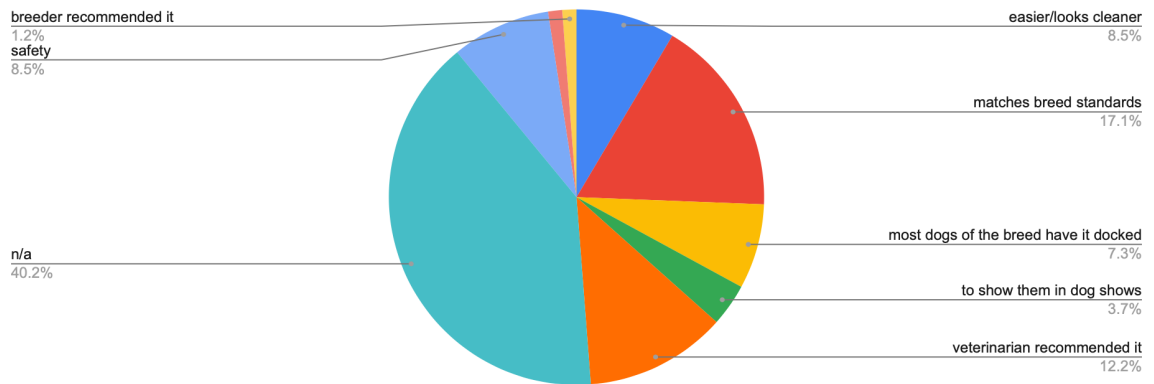


Chart 2: Frequency of the various reasons those that have chosen the procedure in relation to those who have not or would not choose the procedure.

Why did you choose the procedure?

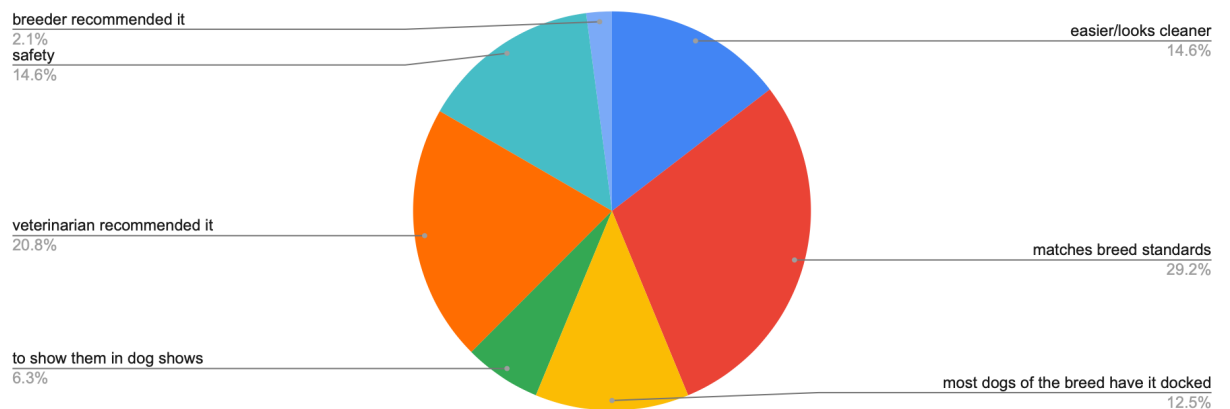


Chart 3: Breakdown of most common reasons for choosing the procedure amongst those who did.

Breeders/Owners: If you found out it could increase the chances of certain issues in the future, would you still plan to do it?

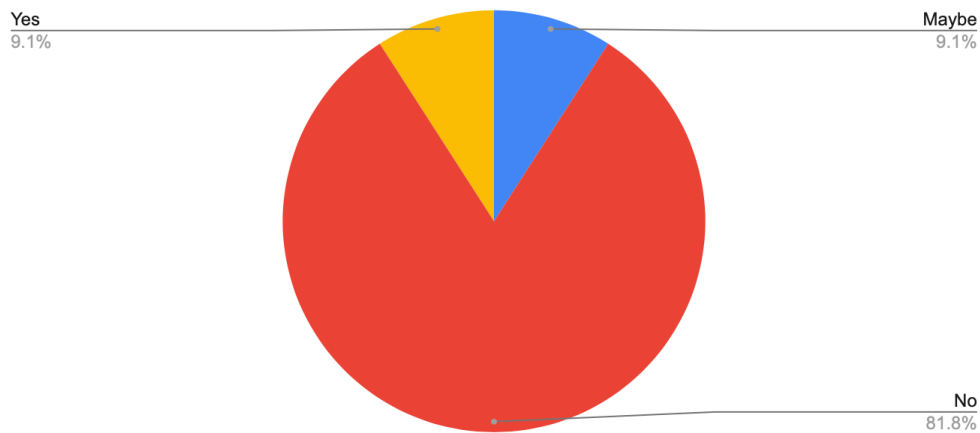


Chart 4: Depiction of whether owners' and breeders' opinions on the issue would change based on the possibility of future issues.

Breeders/Owners: If you found out it causes the puppy brief pain, would you still plan to do it?

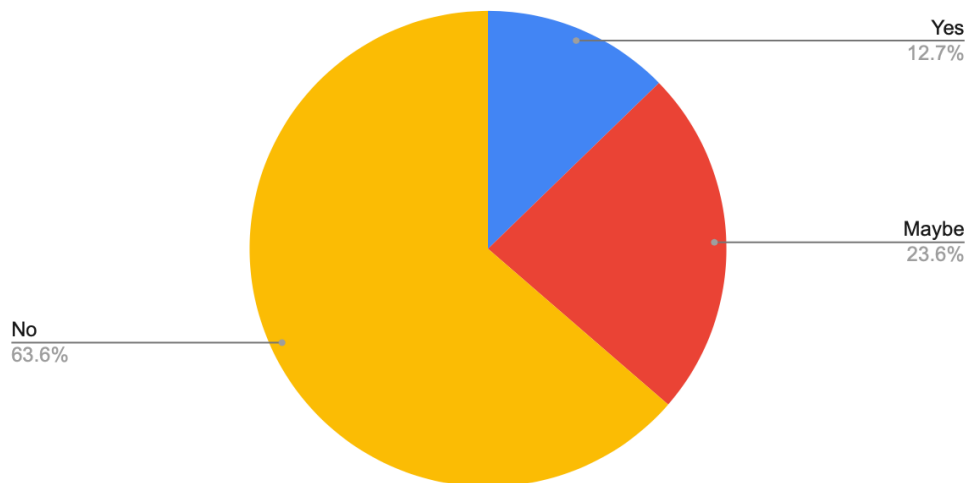


Chart 5: Depiction of whether owners' and breeders' opinions on the issue would change based on if they found out it causes pain.

Breeders/Owners: What age do you think is appropriate for a dog to have their tail docked?

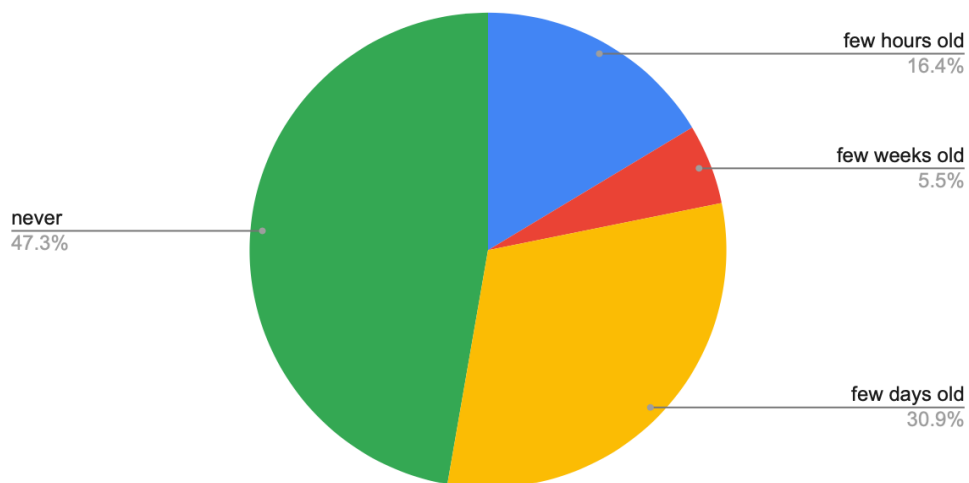


Chart 7.1: Frequency of responses on when the procedure should be done.

Breeders/Owners: What age do you think is appropriate for a dog to have their tail docked?

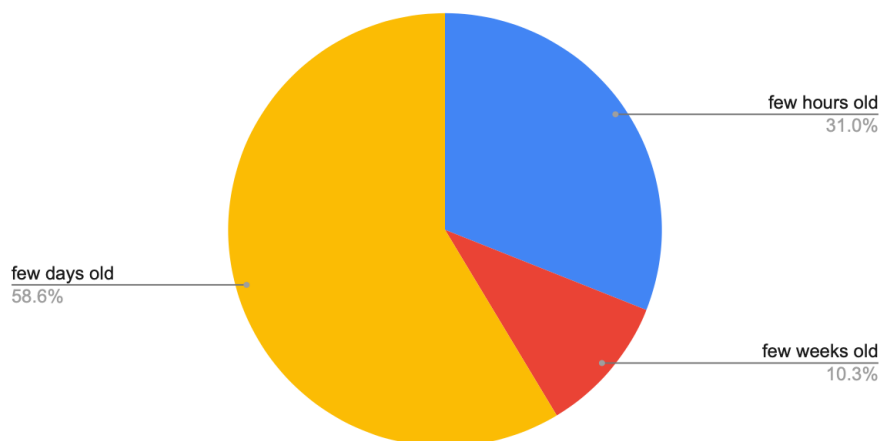


Chart 7.2: The responses of appropriate age amongst those that agreed with tail docking.

What mechanism for tail docking do you prefer most?
The only appropriate method is sterile amputation at a predetermined vertebral space and suturing it closed
Surgical
amputation using guillotine nail trimmer
Mayos and close with suture
surgical removal
incisional
Clamp, scalpel cut, then suture closed
Surgical

Chart 8: Veterinarians' responses to "What mechanism for tail docking do you most prefer?"

Do you believe, in general, that it is medically unnecessary / a cosmetic procedure?
Yes x 4
Largely cosmetic with a handful of exceptions.
Maybe
It is considered cosmetic, but can be beneficial dependent upon work/use of the dog
I believe it is more cosmetic procedure; it can help in some hunting dogs to prevent injury

Chart 9: Veterinarians' responses to whether they believe the procedure is medically unnecessary.

Are there any adverse side effects of the procedure? If yes, please explain.
Yes-multiple, including infection and neurological damage
Impediment to communication with other dogs, decreases counterbalance/stability when dog is in motion
no, except for surgical complications
Occasionally can become infected
poor healing, mutilation by poor surgeons/owners
Hemorrhage, potential neurologic issues if poorly performed.
Infection; if cut too short, nerve damage can happen; occasional pain at scar site
Not if done correctly Docking the tail too short can potentially cause issues

Chart 10: Veterinarians' responses to adverse side effects to the procedure.

If you believe it is medically necessary, what breeds and why?
cocker spaniels- problems with fecal obstipation and other long haired breeds,
Hunting/sporting breeds it is necessary to prevent injury
In some field working dogs it can prevent injury while working
I do believe that it helps prevent tail injury in hunting dogs

Chart 11: Responses by veterinarians who do believe it can be medically necessary.

Are there any benefits or positive outcomes to the procedure?
No.
In longer, thin skinned, whip-like tails, happy-tail can be painful and persistent.
there are some breeds that benefit, especially for hunting reasons.
No medical benefit that I am aware of
obstipation prevention
yes, prevention of injury
could prevent injuries in working dogs - tail trauma
Prevention of tail injuries in hunting dogs

Chart 12: Responses by veterinarians on whether there are benefits to the procedure.



Why do you believe, in your own opinion, owners want to dock their dogs' tails?

Because they are told to do so by breeders and/or the akc

Visual perception of breed standard

breed expectation

Cosmetics

breed specific standards, owner preference

Breed standards

some for the look; we have some who do it for their hunting dogs

To meet breed standards

Chart 13: Responses by veterinarians on why they think owners choose the procedure. Responses on why breeders choose the procedure were similar.

**Veterinarians: If an owner insists on having the dogs' tail docked, what age should it be done at?**

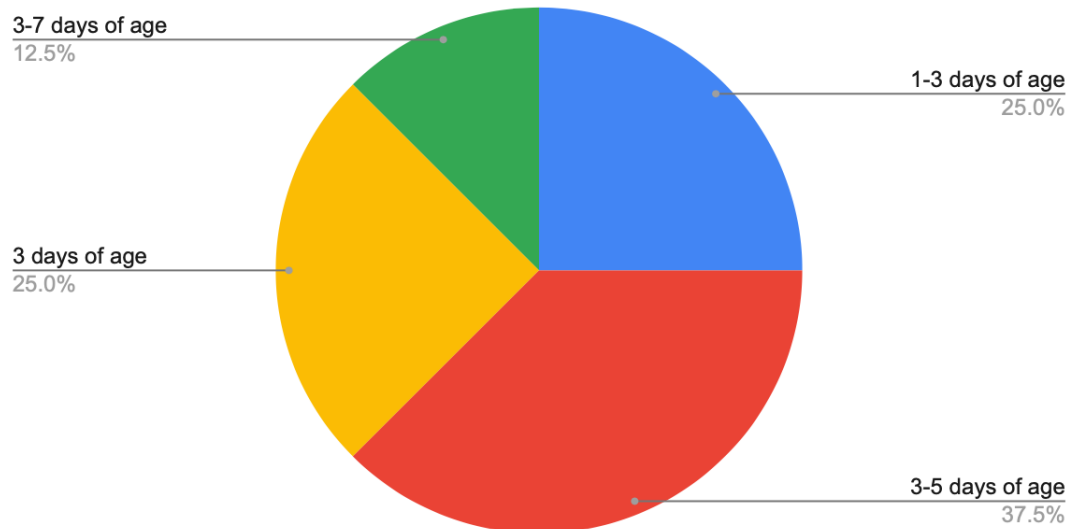


Chart 14: Responses by veterinarians on at what age the procedure should be done.

Is "matching breed standards" an appropriate reason to have a dog's tail docked/to undergo a medically unnecessary procedure?

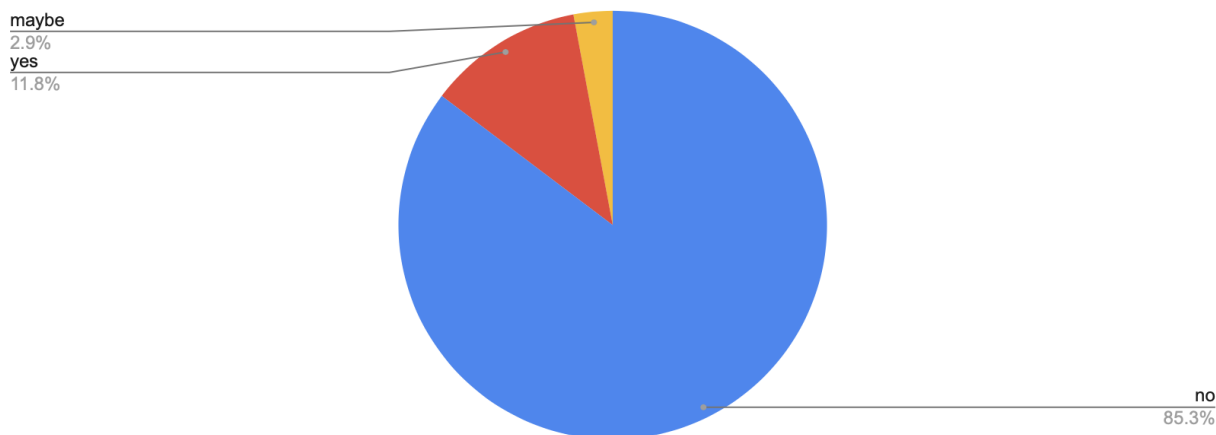


Chart 15: Responses by breeders and owners on whether they believe docking tails to match breed standards is an appropriate reason.

## DATA INTERPRETATION

The data collection pool includes solely South Carolina residents that have owned dogs or bred dogs. The various demographic locations of South Carolina were represented, as well. Of the participants, 65.5% identified as living in a suburban area or residential neighborhood, 18.2% identified as living in a rural area, and 16.3% identified as living in a city. The majority of participants were in the 20 to 60 years of age range.

Only 20% of participants agreed strongly with docking dogs' tails, as shown in Chart 1. Chart 1 also shows that 54.5% do not agree with the procedure. The rest of the participants were unsure of whether they agreed or disagreed, and many of their answers depended on various circumstances. For the breeders and participants that chose the procedure, most people responded with a variety of reasons: breeders recommended it, safety, easier and cleaner look, matching of breed standards, to show them in dog shows, and the veterinarian recommended it. On Chart 3, 64.7% of the responses can be respectively attributed to some form of matching expected breed

standards and looks (“matching breed standards,” “most dogs of the breed have it docked,” “breeder recommended it,” “to show them in dog show,” and “easier/looks cleaner”). This is interesting, because it places blame on the stereotypical standards established within the breeds.

According to a policy statement made by the American Veterinary Medical Association, “the AVMA opposes ear cropping and tail docking of dogs when done solely for cosmetic purposes. The AVMA encourages the elimination of ear cropping and tail docking from breed standards (6).” This updated policy statement by the AVMA is telling in that it directly opposes the idea that 41.7% of participants used for justification of the procedure. The American Kennel Club, responsible for upholding breed standards and maintaining the integrity of breeds, issued a statement in response to the AVMA’s statement: “The American Kennel Club 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 (7).”

The issue becomes which organization to listen to for the greater interest of the canines in question. Is it more important to maintain breed standards for showing, selling, and historical purposes, or should the practice be eliminated due to physical lack of necessity? Further, what defines “necessity?” It is clear that the AKC considers the practice as necessary and discourages the label “cosmetic” in reference to the procedure. The AKC considers the practice necessary for the “history and function of purebred dogs (7).” The safety of certain purebred and working dogs that perform integral roles in Homeland Security, military, and the police force is a legitimate concern for all parties involved in the discussion. However, is this argument in support of tail docking enough? Upon further look at the AVMA statement, they specifically mention that they

only oppose the procedure when done for only cosmetic reasons. If the procedure is done for reasons outside aesthetic or cosmetic looks, then the procedure is supported.

The percentage of participants that chose the procedure for their dogs outside of looks, for safety or because the veterinarian recommended it, was 35.4% (Chart 3). The AKC supports maintaining breed standards, and there isn't inherently anything wrong with this. They state that they support this in order to maintain breed standards for “the welfare of the breed and the function it was bred to perform (7).” Further, they believe owners “have the right to make decisions regarding appropriate care and treatment of their pets (7).” That is true, but it can be considered misleading, as they are combining every reason the procedure is done as appropriate and essential care. The AVMA as well as 76.5% of owner and breeder survey participants do not consider “matching breed standards” as an appropriate reason for choosing the procedure. Those that do consider it an appropriate reason listed showing dogs in contests as the main point. This is interesting because showing dogs is not part of crucial medical care.

If the main interest is the safety of the dog, then there are a couple discrepancies in these opinions. Performing the procedure for breed standard reasons does not inherently contribute to safety. Only does it contribute to safety if the breed standardized dog is specifically going to be performing working duties in which injuries are possible. This is also controversial, as one study in Great Britain mentioned in a case study by Eyarefe and Oguntaye stated that the percentage of tail injuries in working dogs was 0.29% and 0.23% in non-working dogs (3). It is important to differentiate if those breeders and owners are actually doing it because their dog is working and has a potential for injuring the tail. The vast majority of owners that did choose the procedure did it only for looks, not because the dog was working (Chart 2, 3). Historically, as the AVMA and AKC mention, the breed standards came into being because certain breeds were classified as

working dogs, but many of these breeds' working tendencies have fallen out of practice. Using safety as a reason seems to be taking more credit than it deserves.

Also mentioned in the case study by Eyarefe and Oguntoye, “tail docking is associated with severe acute pain which often causes behavior distress in puppies especially when performed without anesthesia” (3). This is proof that the procedure causes the puppy pain, and is only heightened when performed without medical professionals or sterile technique, such as the banding method. Risk of infections are very possible, and chronic medical issues can arise, especially in cases not performed by veterinarians, such as “fecal incontinence, atrophy of pelvic muscles, frequent tail damage, impaired locomotory and communication defects” (3). Responses from surveyed veterinarians align with this, including hemorrhages, infection, decreased counterbalance, and neurological damage (Chart 10). Despite documented medical proof, only 63.6% of surveyed breeders and owners stated that knowledge of pain and suffering in their puppies would deter them from choosing the procedure (Chart 5). This may be due to the opposition from those supporting tail docking, who claim there is not enough evidence that the procedure is detrimental (4).

When taking the responses of the veterinarian participants into consideration, there are some important differences in answers. While the veterinarians who answered my survey did differ in opinion on some things, there were a few elements that they all agreed on. First, every veterinarian agreed that the only acceptable mechanism for docking the tails is through surgical means by a licensed veterinarian (Chart 8). They also all agreed that the procedure should be done within a week of birth, with the majority saying in between 1 to 5 days of age (Chart 14). They were all in agreement that the docking of dogs' tails should not be done after a week of age. In comparison, 10.3% of breeders and owners think it should be done a few weeks after birth and

31% believe within hours of birth (Chart 7.2). While the majority, 58.6%, of owners and breeders agree with the experts in the field, there is still a large number that either don't follow veterinarian advice or aren't knowledgeable on the preferred practice.

Historically, tails were docked in working dogs to prevent injury. I asked the veterinarians for their opinion on why they believe owners still want to do it for safety measures, considering most dogs that have the procedure done now aren't working dogs like in the past. One veterinarian that wished to stay anonymous stated the following:

“Although in many breeds docking is purely aesthetic, claims about safety measures in certain breeds - even if they are not 'working' traditionally - are valid. Based on how over-represented long whip-like tails are in breeds that are undocked (greyhounds, Great Danes), it is highly likely that breeds like GSP, Doberman etc will notice a significant increase in happy-tail when docking-optional practices normalize (Unnamed DVM).”

A review article by Bennett and Perini takes a subjective approach, effectively disputing through evidence, or lack thereof, the points on both sides of the arguments, in support or against tail docking (4). Bennett and Perini address the issues behind claims in support of tail-docking for working dogs in their review article:

“Moreover, if docking is to be justified for the purpose of preventing adult tail damage in any breed, two assumptions require empirical support. First, evidence is required to support the claim that these traditionally docked dogs are particularly likely to sustain tail damage if left undocked, and that they are likely to do so in sufficient numbers to justify docking all members of the particular

breed. Second, it is necessary to establish that tail damage in adult dogs is likely to cause substantially more suffering than does the docking process.

Unfortunately, persuasive evidence with which to either support or refute such claims is lacking. Since tail docking has been banned in Sweden, there has reportedly been a significant increase in the number of dogs from some breeds presenting to veterinary clinics with tail damage” (4).

This is an important point to highlight, since safety was mentioned by breeders, owners, and some veterinarians. However, if safety is the goal, then why do some breeders perform at-home style tail dockings? This provides ammunition for one important part of the argument made by some of the veterinarian participants that they are worried that if the procedure is banned, breeders will do it unsafely at home, either too early or too late, which can add unnecessary pain and complications. In response to the “banding method” that is commonly done by breeders at home, every veterinarian that completed the survey was against this procedure, with reason. Dr. Neal Atkinson said “it is proven that it is more of a problem and pain for the dog than surgical removal is.” The “banding method” is when ties are placed around the puppy’s tail until the tissue necrotizes and falls off. Quotes by other Anonymous Doctors of Veterinary Medicine said the procedure, if not surgically performed by a veterinarian, and in direct reference to banding, is “not safe or medically appropriate with an increased risk of complication;” “a poor choice (with) higher risk of infection and complications;” and “not an appropriate way to dock tails.”

One argument that can be made for breeders performing the banding method at home is for selling purposes, enhancing their attractiveness to buyers that want to register and show their

dogs. Is that enough of a reason for a procedure? And if so, the safest option would be to have a veterinarian do it. Saving money by using rubber bands until the tissue falls off may save money, but it isn't ethical, and can lead to further problems. It is clear that veterinarians disagree with this method, and the AKC explicitly states the procedure should be done “in consultation with their veterinarian” and owners “have the right to make decisions regarding appropriate care and treatment of their pets (7).” The statement is ironic because, first, they are considering matching breed standards as “appropriate care and treatment (7).” There needs to be a differentiation in the statement that separates veterinary care such as medically necessary tail docking for safety from the matching of breed standards. Second, if safety and care is the utmost concern, then the AKC should openly discourage at-home banding techniques. If tail docking for matching breed standards was discouraged by the AKC, then there would be no substantial reason for breeders to feel urged to dock the tails for selling. Matching breed standards wouldn't be a concern. The AKC considers matching breed standards to be important.

From the AKC's statement “labeling these procedures as “cosmetic” is a severe mischaracterization that connotes a lack of respect and knowledge of history and the function of purebred dogs (7)” But, according to responses from veterinary professionals, the only benefits of the procedure only come from safety reasons, such as prevention of happy-tail, obstipation prevention, and prevention of injury in hunting and working dogs (Chart 12). It isn't a misrepresentation to label the procedure as “cosmetic” when it is done solely for looks. Considering there are definitely chances for adverse side effects, such as infection, neurological damage, issues with counterbalance and stability, and communication impediments (Chart 10), unnecessary procedures should be avoided. These are higher risk when the procedure is not done by licensed veterinarians, where the proper instruments, sterile techniques, and knowledge on



proper length to dock and age are not used. The AKC emphasizes the need for the procedure for “keeping foremost in mind the welfare of the breed and the function it was bred to perform (7).” Is maintaining the historical standard for a breed enough of a reason? The AVMA’s statement is not calling for the abolition of tail-docking, they are just encouraging eliminating it from breed look standards (6). Eliminating the procedure when done just for cosmetic reasons does not jeopardize “the welfare of the breed and the function it was bred to perform (7).”

The majority of survey participants deem the procedure as unethical and respond that “matching breed standards” is not a substantial or appropriate reason to have a cosmetic procedure done. The AKC claims that tail docking to match breed standards does not fall under the cosmetic category (7). However, the procedure, when done to match breed standards, formerly set by these kennel clubs, is inherently cosmetic and thus unnecessary. The veterinarians surveyed agree that the procedure is cosmetic and unnecessary when done for just this reason, and they believe that owners and breeders overwhelmingly do it for aesthetic purposes, with exceptions including hunting breeds (Chart 9, 13).

What if we limited the procedure to only medically necessary instances: for dogs working in the armed forces or police forces, for hunting dogs, and for breeds that historically damage their tails? That would eliminate the procedure being done for showing purposes and to strictly match breed standards, but would require strict, industry wide, change.

## **OUTCOME AND POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE**

I believe that this research will contribute to the conversations within the field of veterinary medicine because this is a controversial topic, and researching the perceptions and opinions surrounding the procedure in a localized area will help deduce the common, underlying

reason this procedure is used; this then can be used with further expert data to carry on the discussion into other procedures on pets done outside of medical necessity, such as ear cropping, declawing, and more.

While there was disagreement amongst experts in the field, the Doctors of Veterinary Medicine, on whether they supported tail docking overall, they all had stipulations on how the procedure should be used. However, there was an overwhelming agreement amongst the veterinarians on the way in which tail docking should be approached– surgical methods are the only appropriate and humane way for the procedure to occur. The preferred method by veterinarians is a sterile amputation such as with a hemostat, scalpel, and suture to close the incision. This starkly contrasts a common yet disputed method used by many breeders, the banding method to kill the tail tissue until it falls off.

Most of the veterinarians surveyed do not agree in a total ban of tail docking, as there are certain breeds in which it is appropriate or necessary. However, it is admitted that the procedure is done in more cases than those that are just appropriate or necessary. The only way to minimize the use of the procedure is to clarify what is considered appropriate and necessary means to dock the tail of a dog. To start, there needs to be strong adherence to the AVMA's updated statement on the policy that tail docking should be eliminated from breed standards when done for unnecessary reasons, such as for aesthetic or cosmetic purposes.

The next step is for the kennel clubs that dictate what breeds should look like, such as the AKC, to allow for more breeds to be shown with their natural tail, as that will eliminate the desire many breeders and owners have to dock the tails of dogs they don't use as hunting or working dogs. This way, the procedure can be limited to only people who want to protect their hunting or working dogs from obtaining injuries. Completely eliminating the process would be

dangerous, as people will continue to seek it and be limited to using non-sterile techniques at home, leading to increases in infections, accidents, and long-term detrimental side-effects of not having the procedure done by trained individuals. Therefore, the only practical solution to the over-representation of cosmetic tail docking procedures is to have the AKC and other kennel clubs enforce and support the AVMA's new policy that aligns with local veterinarian opinion and support.

Breed standards can be changed, and by highlighting how matching these breed standards is the majority reason owners and breeders choose the procedure brings light to how it isn't necessarily what they want to do, but what they feel they have to do. This proves there is exigence in the field to reevaluate the necessity, or lack thereof, to match these standardized ideas of what a breed should look like. With the majority of people either disagreeing altogether with tail docking or saying they only do it because it is what society tells them their breeds should look like, emphasis is placed on the real societal crisis— that performing a procedure on our pets for looks shouldn't be standardized. If our pets are really extensions of our families, who we love tremendously and grieve over when lost, unnecessary medical procedures for looks should be eliminated from practice. Survey responses indicate that tail docking for looks is medically unnecessary. In order to effectively eliminate unnecessary medical procedures such as tail docking, a distinction has to be made that the procedure can and is done in cases where the breeds historically are prone to injury when working and hunting. My survey responses prove that while most do it for aesthetic reasons, some also do it for injury prevention. The first step in limiting unnecessary usage of the procedure is for the AKC and other kennel clubs to recognize that these standards are outdated and not serving the historical purpose of prevention of injury in many of the breeds. This provides a distinction and would implement usage only when the goal

is injury prevention. However, safety as a top priority should limit the procedure to being performed by trained medical professionals, veterinarians, at the correct age and length.

This research will be a jumping-off point for my future studies and my end-goal as a veterinarian. In my research on dog tail docking, addressing the ethical issues of performing medically unnecessary procedures on pets and questioning why people would choose to go forward with the procedure starts the discussion on what it truly means for pets to be our “family members.” My unique research will serve as a stepping stone to reaching a breaking point in the conversation on elective procedures on our extended family— our pets.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Noonan, G. J., et al. "Behavioural Observations of Puppies Undergoing Tail Docking."

*Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1996, pp. 335–42,

[https://doi.org/10.1016/0168-1591\(96\)01062-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0168-1591(96)01062-3).

This article is a good objective analysis to describe and confirm the pain and feeling young dogs feel when undergoing tail docking procedures. The major takeaway is that, despite popular belief, these dogs that undergo tail docking do feel the pain. The study shows statistics that correlate the whimpering and vocalizations during and after the procedure to indicate pain. It also describes anatomically why they would feel pain, and relates it to a study of dogs that underwent the procedure as they were monitored. I will use this article to provide statistics on my argument that it is a painful process. This will be good data to use in analyzing owners and veterinarians' perceptions on the procedure, and whether it is ethical considering this provides proof of pain.

2. Mills, Katelyn E., Marina A. G. von Keyserlingk, and Lee Niel. "A review of medically unnecessary surgeries in dogs and cats". *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 248.2 (2016): 162-171. <<https://doi.org/10.2460/javma.248.2.162>>. Web. 15 Feb. 2022.

This article details how the procedure of tail docking in dogs is medically unnecessary and performed for cosmetic reasons at the owners' request or the breeders' decision. This article is a good source of description of the surgical process required during tail docking, the anatomy, and the procedure. It also discusses arguments for and against the procedure, thus providing an

objective viewpoint. I can use this piece to make sure I am knowledgeable on the process and the different viewpoints surrounding the procedure. This pairs well with the article by Eyarefe.

3. Eyarefe, Oghenemega David, and Cecilia O. Oguntoye. "Cosmetic Tail Docking: An Overview of Abuse and Report of an Interesting Case." *BMC Veterinary Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, Feb. 2016, p. 41, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12917-016-0666-z>.

This article provides various viewpoints and chronicles the controversies regarding cosmetic tail docking in dogs. It gives a good description and background of the procedure, which I can use in coalition with the previous article. This article also recounts studies of medical issues that occurred in tail docking procedures, which will provide good statistics and information to back up my argument. This article is fairly subjective in that it concludes that the procedure is cruel and unnecessary, but I can use its arguments to further my analysis on the ethical perceptions of the procedure and conclude my argument against the procedure. This pairs well with the article by Mills.

4. Bennett, P C, and E Perini. "Tail docking in dogs: a review of the issues." *Australian veterinary journal* vol. 81,4 (2003): 208-18. doi:10.1111/j.1751-0813.2003.tb11473.x

This article aims to be objective in its overview of both sides to the controversy surrounding dog tail docking. It also aims to correlate this objective description with the biological, anatomical, and behavioral facts that define dogs and the tails. Like previous articles, I can use it to ensure I fully understand and accurately depict the tail docking process. I will also use it to support my analysis of the ethical dilemmas, perceptions, and arguments for and against support in my paper.

It will pair well with the arguments presented in the above articles as well as with the statistics presented in various studies, including Eyarefe and Mills.

5. Diesel, G et al. "Risk factors for tail injuries in dogs in Great Britain." *The Veterinary record* vol. 166,26 (2010): 812-7. doi:10.1136/vr.b4880

This article dives into studies on why dog tail docking may be done for practical or preventative measures. I can use this in my paper to ensure I am properly analyzing the ethical perceptions of why people choose to dock their dogs' tails. It obviously doesn't prove true for every person that chooses to do it, as many do it for cosmetic purposes, but it does provide a good way to analyze the reasons some choose to do it. I can use this article to do that as well as further analyze whether more people do it for cosmetic reasons. It can also help me correlate demographics to the reasons people choose to do tail docking. This article will be situated in the pro-dog tail docking section of my paper that analyzes the data from owners that believe it is necessary or a positive procedure.

6. AVMA. "Ear Cropping and Tail Docking of Dogs." *American Veterinary Medical Association*, American Veterinary Medical Association, 2022,

<https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/avma-policies/ear-cropping-and-tail-docking-dogs>.

This website details the American Veterinary Medical Associations viewpoint of dog tail docking and elective procedures, and can be used in direct comparison to dispute claims made in support of matching breed standards.

7. AKC Communications. "AKC Statement on AVMA Crop and Dock Policy." *American Kennel Club*, American Kennel Club, 21 Nov. 2008,

<https://www.akc.org/press-releases/akc-statement-on-avma-crop-and-dock-policy/>.

This website details the AKC's statement on why they believe matching breed standards is a substantial reason to continue these procedures, including dog tail docking.