Canine tail injuries in New Zealand: Causes, treatments and risk factors and the prophylactic justification for canine tail docking.

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Abstract

Tail docking of dogs is often justified on the basis that it prevents tail injury, particularly in working and hunting dogs. However, little data exists on canine tail injuries in New Zealand.

Retrospective data from eight years' worth of records was collected from the clinical databases of 16 veterinary practices. A keyword search "tail" was run, and the results filtered manually to find all canine cases of tail injuries. 0.9% (n=619) of all dogs seen by the vet clinics over the study period suffered a tail injury. The most common given causes were accidents (13.3%, n=83), half of these (6.7% n=41) from a door shutting on the tail. The second most common causes were vehicle related, for example being hit by or falling out of a car or utility vehicle (10.0%, n=62).

Over half (51%, n=318) of the injuries were resolved by treatment with medication and over three quarters (77.7%, n=484) required a single vet visit. Only 13.8% (n=86) of tail injuries led to amputation.

Non-docked breeds are assumed to have intact tails. There was a significant association (P=0.003, Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel Chi-squared test) between tail injury and not belonging to a docked breed. The odds ratio for belonging to non-docked breed was 6.15 (95% CI 5.83, 6.50) meaning a non-docked dog was at least six times more likely to injure their tail as a docked breed dog.

Only 15.4% (n=96) of tail injuries occurred in traditionally docked breeds, but, the most common cause of injury within that group was docking itself (21.9%, n=21).

Labradors, the most popular pedigree pet breed, injured themselves more often (1.4%, n=100) than the most popular hunting (pig dogs, 1.3%, n=23) and farming (Huntaway, 1.0%, n=60) breeds.

It appears that tail injury is rarely observed usually easily treated. Tail docking puppies seems a severe method of preventing such injuries when only 13.8% had injuries or 0.12% of dogs visiting vet clinics require tail amputation.

This study used a novel data mining technique with a specially written SQL script to search the clinical databases of the clinics. This made the process more efficient, and data was reasonably complete. The clinic software is used widely in vet clinics in New Zealand, so this technique could be used for similar epidemiological research in future.

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