

Canine Tails

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Tails on a dog are not only used for communication but also for assisting in carrying out specific tasks as well. Tails are breed specific, each with a certain purpose. Some dogs have little or no tails, while others have long tails extending from their body.

Tails are located at the end of the vertebral column and consist of between 6 and 23 mobile or extra vertebrae. Enclosed by a versatile musculature make various segments for movement. Caudal muscles are attached to the tail vertebrae by tendons. Between 4 to 7 paired nerves serve the tail muscles. The tail starts at the pelvis where it joins the sacral region near the end of the croup and ends at the end of the tail. It is a continuation of the spine.

Types of tails

Different breeds of dogs have distinct types of tails which leads to the characteristic of the dog. Names given to these tails refer to length, position and shape.

- Bobtail – naturally tail less or docked very short
(i.e. Schipperke, Old English Sheepdog)
- Brush – similar to a fox, covered in medium length bushy hair
(i.e. Alaskan Malamute, Siberian Husky)
- Crank – carried down resembling an old fashioned crank
(i.e. Staffordshire Bull Terrier)
- Curled – set high and curled. Single or double by curling over the back.
(i.e. Finnish Spitz)
- Flag – long and carried high
(i.e. Beagle)
- Kink – Sharply bent
(i.e. Lhasa Apso)
- Otter – Thick at root, round and tapering towards tip
(i.e. Labrador Retriever)
- Ring – carried up and around
(i.e. Basenji)
- Sabre – carried like a sabre
(i.e. Basset Hound)
- Corkscrew – Naturally short twisted in a spiral
(i.e. French Bulldog)
- Sickle – Carried out and up in a semi circle
(i.e. Affenpinscher)
- Spike – Short and thick tapering quickly along its entire length
(i.e. English Lakeland Terrier)
- Squirrel – carried up and curving forward
(i.e. Chow Chow)
- Whip – carried stiffly straight and pointed
(i.e. Bull Terrier)

Communication and Function

Dogs communicate with other dogs through vocalization and body language. The tail performs a very important part in their body language. The position and motion can indicate what the dog is feeling and thinking.

A wagging tail, held high, with a back and forth motion usually is feeling happy, whereas low and wagging usually means he is worried or insecure. A tail horizontal to the ground could indicate he is interested in something, while a tail that is tucked under indicated a frightened or submissive dog. If a tail goes from relaxed to frigid and possibly upright, he is feeling threatened or challenged. It also is a way to spread his natural scent around him sending signals of dominance (wagging) or trying to cover up his sent (tucked) signaling submission so no other animal will sniff him. Studies have also indicated that a dog wagging their tail to the left created stress in other dogs while wagging to the right created relaxation. However, it was noted that the subtleties of the wagging was almost transparent to humans.

Tails also are a means to assist in various tasks such as swimming by using their tails as rudders. Others use their tails to maintain balance while others have tails for insulation such as in northern breeds.

Tail set Versus Tail carriage

Set versus carriage are mistakingly thought of as having the same meaning but actually are not interchangeable terms. Tail set is just that, where the tail is placed on the body whereas tail carriage is how the dog uses or carries its tails (communication).

Tail Set

Tail set is where the tail attaches to the rump and are in conjunction with the croup. The type of tail set is also breed specific with a certain purpose. If dogs have an incorrect tail set, this can cause structural damage.

Too rounded or steep croup with a low tail set can lead to lower back issues by creating increased pressure on joints of rear legs.

A flat croup with a high tail set can change the angle of hip socket putting the dog more at risk for hip dysplasia.

Short croup reduces power and drive by shorter muscles attached to the upper thigh. Lack of muscles create stress on other muscles which compensate for the lack of muscle.

A wry tail can be a sign of soundness issues or a malformation of the coccygeal vertebrae if not created by an injury.

Tail Carriage

Tail carriage goes back to communication, how the dog portrays happiness, stress, concentration and attitude. It also plays a role in movement as there are three major muscle groups that lift the tail that are connected to the dorsal muscles of the back. The caudalis and sacrococcygeus assist in the tail wag.

Diseases

There are several type of diseases that can affect a canine tail.

Hemivertebrae or butterfly vertebrae of the tail is a malformation whereas there is no spinal tissue thereby fitting the hemivertebrae into the spine. It does not cause issue with the dog and is more cosmetic.

Cold, dead, limber tail created by muscle injury or cold waer and very painful to the dog. It usually heals unattended within a few days

Tail Gland Hyperplasia where the gland is on the top of the tail near the base. This disease creates hair loss and can be extremely itchy.

Fractures, dislocations are created through an injury or trauma. These type of injuries are healed over an extended period of time.

Cauda Equina Syndrome is caused by compression of nerve roots from the lower back toward the tail at the level of the lumbosacral junction. Depending on the severity, it can be treated through rest and medications or as serious as surgery.

Conclusion

As indicated, the tail plays an important role in the dog's health and well being, It can help create a structurally sound dog and is key in understanding the communication of dogs.

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