

Tail Injuries

By Dr. Karen Becker

Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker. Believe it or not, there are actually a lot of things that can go wrong with your pet's tail. Unless you've been there and done that, and you have a pet with a tail injury or a pet that has recovered from a tail injury, it's actually a pretty scary experience when you're going through it.

The tail is actually pretty injury-prone, because it's an unprotected and frequently moving body part. Tail injuries are much more common in dogs than in kitties. However, it's not totally unheard of for a kitty to harm her tail as well.

Tail damage can range from a simple pinch, which is what happens when a dog or cat's tail maybe stepped on or it gets stuck in a door, or it can be a very serious issue, involving significant bleeding and some nerve damage, depending on the trauma. Depending on how much pain is involved, your dog can literally yelp in agony with a tail injury that can actually perpetuate itself in terms of pain for several weeks after the original insult.

With certain types of injuries, his normally wagging tail may just hang limply, which is, of course, also alarming, especially if you have a generally happy dog that uses his tail to express his emotions.

The tail is actually an extension of your pet's spine. It's simply a more mobile and flexible part of its spine. The tail contains bones called caudal or coccygeal vertebrae that progressively get smaller along the length of the tail. There are small joints and discs in between each bone that cushion them as well. There are blood vessels and nerves all along the length of the tail, as well as muscles that control the movement of the tail and also play a role in the pooping process for both dogs and cats.

Feral cats and free-roaming pets are victims of tail scrapes and hair loss during the winter months. Because in an effort to stay warm, a lot of feral kitties will crawl up into a warm engine area of a turned-off car, and they tend to stay there. When the car owner comes out, jumps in, and starts the car, obviously kitties wake up suddenly. Oftentimes, in an effort to escape quickly, they can damage their tails.

That's why I always recommend knocking on the hood of your car before you get into the driver's seat and start the car during the cold months. It's a good way to make sure if any animal, including birds or others, are trying to stay warm, they are able to evacuate your car.

If your pet's tail suffers from an abrasion or any type of trauma that looks ultra-scary, it's important that you contact your veterinarian. But obviously if there's heavy bleeding or if there's a huge chunk of skin missing, a trip to the emergency [animal] clinic may be warranted if you can't get the bleeding to stop. In cases where the skin on the tail is severely or extensively damaged, healing may take quite a while. In fact the injury can be very painful until the skin or the hair grows back.

Trauma is almost always the cause of a fracture in a dog or cat's tail. Examples include being hit by a car, getting the tail caught in a closing door, or getting it stepped on. Even when a dog or cat maybe falls off a bed or a couch, he can also fracture his tail that way as well.

The good news is that a simple fracture at the end of your pet's tail oftentimes heals well totally on its own. You don't have to do anything. No casting. No surgery. Nothing.

There might be a kink in the dog or cat's tail where the trauma was and, on. On rare occasions, with severely damaged tails where there's a crushing injury or a lot of separation of the tailbones, sometimes the tip of the tail has to be amputated at that point. That's very, very rare, but sometimes it does occur.

When dogs and cats recover from tail fractures, oftentimes that permanent kink will cause them to be sensitive in that area. When you're stroking your dog or cat, when you get down to that area, a lot of times, they're alarmed for the rest of their life. There could be some residual pain. But most of the time, they guard that fractured area so much. At that point, you just leave that part of the tail alone when it comes to touching.

Nerve damage to a dog or cat's tail is often the result of being pulled. This is known as an avulsion injury. It can impact the nerves and muscles so much so around the tail that you can actually see temporary issues with urination and defecation. Nerve function can return over time, but a pet with this type of injury often needs help to relieve himself while his healing. Obviously you need to take your pet to the veterinarian if he can't go pee or poo after a tail injury obviously.

Happy Tail Syndrome

Now, happy tail syndrome is a nickname for an unhappy condition that's seen most often in large dogs with thin, smooth tails that wag them so wildly they become injured. The caudal vertebrae in your dog's tail consist of between 5 and 20 bones, making up the tail. When you couple the 5 to 20 bones (they're very, very small) with a good supply of blood vessels covered only with very thin skin and maybe short hair, and you attach that to the backend of a very happy large breed dog, you can end up with happy tail.

The force with which a large dog can wag his tail and hit hard surfaces over and over or for a long period of time can cause actually a lot of serious damage to the tail, especially to the tip of the tail. The skin around the tip of the tail can take such a beating that once it starts to bleed, it can be nearly impossible for the bleeding to stop.

The tail injury can in turn cause a non-healing wound on the tip of the tail. If your dog has a tail injury where there's a cut or a large gash from thumping it against a hard or sharp surface, obviously you need to go to your veterinarian, because at that point, immediately after the injury, the tail may need to be sutured and sometimes bandaged to prevent further insult or injury.

In addition, these wounds can become infected pretty easily, because dogs tend to lick them obsessively. If you have a freshly open traumatic wound on the tail, visit your veterinarian.

Limber Tail Syndrome

Limber tail syndrome is also called cold water tail, swimmers tail, and dead tail. It's a relatively common condition of sporting breed dogs, including, the Labrador and the Golden Retriever.

Limber tail syndrome is a very painful [condition] that causes the tail to hang down very limply from its base. Alternatively, sometimes it's held at a horizontal angle for 3 or 4 inches and then straight down.

The condition comes on very quickly and causes the dog a lot of pain when you go to stroke its tail or tail base. Fortunately, other than the pain, it's a relatively benign disorder that resolves on its own usually within a few days to a week.

Limber tail syndrome can occur after swimming most notably, but also after a day of really intense exercise, including outdoor hunting or a lot of outdoor activity. It's interesting, because any activity in which your dog is using its tail a lot has the potential for this to occur.

If your dog has this condition, it can look like his or her tail is actually broken, and you have no idea how. However, the damage isn't actually to the bones of the tail; it's to the muscles. It is a muscle overuse injury typically brought on by overexertion of the tail.

While a limp tail can indicate an actual fracture, spinal cord injury, or other problem, with limber tail, the onset is so sudden – your dog's tail was fine one minute, and then after swimming or intense exercise, it wasn't. That's a pretty good indication that your dog is suffering from this muscular condition that, thank goodness, is temporary.

Generally speaking, limber tail syndrome resolves all by itself. You don't have to do anything other than maybe manage pain. I recommend that you use proteolytic enzyme therapy for managing pain. Homeopathic aconitum is a great remedy to expedite healing in these unique situations.