

This Pet Injury Can Be Very Scary and Painful for Your Pet

It's one of your pet's most injury-prone body parts. Yet you probably hardly ever give it a thought (unless you've lived through this harrowing experience with your pet). Here's what to know and be aware of, because 'an ounce of prevention' ...

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There are many ways your pet's tail can be injured. Tail injuries are much more common in dogs than cats
- Injuries can range from a simple pinch when some inadvertently steps on a pet's tail, to very serious trauma with significant bleeding or nerve damage
- Pet tail injuries include abrasions, fractures, nerve damage (temporary or permanent), "happy tail" syndrome, and "limber tail" syndrome

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 27, 2016.

Believe it or not, there are many things that can go wrong with your pet's tail. Unless you've been there and done that, it can be a pretty scary experience.

The tail tends to be injury-prone because it's an unprotected and frequently moving body part.

Tail injuries are much more common in dogs than in cats. However, it's not unheard of for a kitty to harm her tail as well.

Tail damage can range from a simple pinch, such as when a pet's tail gets accidentally stepped on or is caught in a closing door, or it can be a very serious issue, involving significant bleeding or nerve damage.

Depending on how much pain is involved, your dog can literally yelp in agony with a tail injury. And with certain types of injuries, his normally wagging tail may just hang limply, which is also quite alarming - especially if you have a generally happy dog who uses his tail to express his emotions.

Pet Tail Primer

The tail is actually an extension of your pet's spine – it's simply more mobile and flexible. It is attached to the sacrum, which is a bone at the base of the spine.

The tail contains bones called caudal or coccygeal vertebrae that get progressively smaller along the length of the tail. There are small joints and discs between each bone that cushion them.

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.

Tail Abrasions

Feral cats and free-roaming pets are often the victims of tail scrapes and hair loss during the winter months, because in an effort to stay warm, they tend to climb up into the engine area of parked cars.

The car owner comes out, jumps in the car and starts it up. The cat resting under the hood tries to escape and winds up with an injured or broken tail. This is why I always recommend knocking on the hood of your car before you get into the driver's seat and start the engine during the cold months of the year.

It's a good way to make sure any animal, including birds or other wild creatures, are able to escape before you put the key in the ignition.

If your pet's tail suffers an abrasion, you should make an appointment with your veterinarian right away. If there's heavy bleeding or loss of skin or hair, a trip to the emergency animal hospital may be needed, especially 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 awhile, and the injury can be quite painful for your pet until the skin or hair grows back.

Tail Fractures

Trauma is almost always the cause of a fracture in a dog's or cat's tail. Examples include being hit by a car, getting the tail caught in a closing door, or getting it stepped on, or even when a pet falls off a bed or a couch or hits the floor wrong when he jumps down.

The good news is that a simple fracture at the end of your pet's tail often heals well on its own, without the need for a cast or surgery. On very rare occasions, a severely damaged tail with crushed or separated tailbones may need to be amputated.

After the tail heals, there might be a kink or bump at the location where the fracture occurred. Frequently, the area will remain sensitive, which you'll notice if you try to stroke your pet's tail. If there's residual pain, your dog or cat will guard the area, which is your cue to leave that part of the tail alone.

Damage to Nerves in the Tail

Nerve damage to a dog or cat's tail is often the result of being pulled. This is known as an avulsion injury, and it can impact the nerves and muscles that move the tail and also control urination and defecation.

Nerve function can return over time, but a pet with this type of injury often needs help to relieve himself in the interim. You should take your pet to the veterinarian if he's unable to move his tail, or is unable to pee or poop after a tail injury.

Happy Tail Syndrome

Happy tail syndrome is a nickname for an unhappy condition seen most often in large dogs with thin, smooth tails that wag them so wildly they get injured.

The caudal vertebrae in your dog's tail consist of between 5 and 20 small bones. When you couple those tiny bones with a good supply of blood vessels, cover them with a long tail covered only in short hair or thin skin, and attach it to the backend of a large dog, you can wind up with happy tail.

The force with which a large dog can wag his tail, hitting hard surfaces over and over or for a prolonged period of time, can cause serious damage, especially to the tip of the tail. The skin around the tip can take such a beating that it starts to bleed. And if it happens often enough, the tail injury can turn into a non-healing bleeding ulcer.

If your dog's tail has cuts or gashes from thumping against hard or sharp-edged surfaces, you should consult your veterinarian because the tail may need to be bandaged or even sutured. In addition, these wounds can become infected. Bandaging the tail can help it heal and prevent further injury.

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 breeds, including Labrador and Golden Retrievers.

Limber tail syndrome is very painful and causes the tail to hang down 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, especially when someone tries to stroke his tail or tail base.

Fortunately, other than the pain, it's a relatively benign disorder that resolves on its own within a few days to a week.

Limber tail syndrome occurs most often after swimming, but can also happen after a day of intense exercise, including hunting or other outdoor activities. Any activity in which your dog is using his tail a lot can trigger a limber tail.

If your dog has this condition, it can look like her tail is actually broken. However, the damage isn't actually to the bones of the tail, but to the muscles. It's a muscle 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 sudden – the dog's tail was fine one minute, and then after swimming or intense exercise, it wasn't. Sudden onset is a good indication your dog is suffering from a muscular condition that is temporary.

Generally speaking, limber tail syndrome resolves by itself within a week or so. However, if your dog is hurting, I recommend proteolytic enzyme therapy for pain management. Homeopathic aconitum and arnica are also great remedies to expedite healing in these situations.
