

This Barbaric Fix May Please the Owner, but Devastates the Dog

Restricted or banned in only a very small part of this country, this practice imparts cruel and unusual punishment on the undeserving victim. Luckily, not too many veterinarians are willing to do the surgery that some desperate owners request. Here's what to do instead to fix the problem.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A lawmaker in Michigan has introduced a bill that would outlaw devocalization ("debarking") procedures on pets
- Only six other states have enacted legislation to restrict or ban the practice
- Devocalization involves cutting or removing an animal's vocal cords, and can cause irreversible health problems
- Barking is a natural method of communication for dogs, so people with low tolerance for the behavior should probably choose another type of pet
- Excessive barking can be curbed with training and appropriate lifestyle modifications

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In 2018, a congressman from Lansing, MI, introduced a bill that would ban debarking of dogs. "That's the way the dog communicates with us," State Rep. Tim Sneller told the Detroit Free Press. "To have this done just because you don't want to hear a dog bark is cruel and unusual punishment."¹

Sneller is correct. Devocalization surgeries provide absolutely no benefit to the animal, and are done solely for the convenience of the owner. The most common victims are dogs, but cats are occasionally "de-meowed" as well. The procedure, which involves removing tissue from the vocal cords, can lead to long-term respiratory and throat disorders. It also prohibits communication between the pet and his humans and other animals.

Unfortunately, Sneller doesn't think his bill will get very far. "I don't see it going anywhere, but it was really a point to bring the issue up and urge dog owners to think about it before you do it," he said. "Before you rip out their vocal cords, take your dog to training."

Very Few States Have Devocalization Laws

Sneller is rightfully pessimistic about the chances for his bill, because according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), currently there are just six states that have enacted legislation to prohibit devocalization of dogs under certain circumstances:²

- Massachusetts, Maryland and New Jersey have banned the practice except in cases where it is medically necessary as determined by a veterinarian.
- Pennsylvania prohibits devocalization of any dog for any reason unless the procedure is performed by a licensed veterinarian on an anesthetized dog. (Since these surgeries are most often performed by veterinarians while the animal is anesthetized, this really shouldn't be considered a law "prohibiting" devocalization.)
- California and Rhode Island make it unlawful to require the devocalization or declawing of animals as a condition of real estate occupancy. (This is a nice start, but hardly a comprehensive ban on debarking or declawing.)

Massachusetts was the first to ban the procedure back in 2010. Here we are eight years later, and only a handful of additional states have taken action.

Fortunately, these days many veterinarians refuse to perform the surgery if it's purely for the convenience of the pet owner, breeder or other caregiver. Since devocalization provides no benefit to the animal and can create health problems, it's widely considered inhumane. In fact, devocalization is no longer taught in many veterinary schools. The AVMA's official position on debarking:

"Canine devocalization should only be performed by qualified, licensed veterinarians as a final alternative to euthanasia after behavioral modification to correct excessive vocalization has failed and after discussion of potential complications from the procedure with the owner.

*When dogs are housed in groups (e.g. laboratories, breeding facilities, kennels) devocalization should not be used as an alternative to appropriate animal management and facility design."*³

Those still in favor of the procedure claim it can mean the difference between a vocal dog or cat staying with his family or being surrendered to a shelter. However, there is no evidence to support the theory that pets are given up by their owners for being "too vocal."

What Actually Happens During a Devocalization

The procedure is performed either by cutting into the neck and then the larynx, which severs vocal cord tissue, or by going through the mouth to achieve the same result. The second method is less invasive but has a higher risk of scarring that can cause lifelong problems for the animal.

Not only does the procedure expose a pet to the usual risks of surgery like infection, blood loss and problems with anesthesia, it can also result in scarring of vocal cord tissue regrowth, a condition known as webbing. As with any surgery, there is post-operative pain involved.

Frequently, additional surgery is necessary because after recovery the animal is still able to vocalize, or for correction of unintended consequences from prior procedures. Long-term, often permanent physical consequences for the dog include:

- Chronic coughing and gagging
- Difficulty breathing

- Compromised airway access
- Exercise intolerance
- Elevated stress level
- Increased risk to physical safety due to inability to alert or warn through barking

There can also be psychological and behavioral consequences from a decreased ability to communicate naturally. The altered voices of devocalized pets have been variously described as lower, harsher, muffled, raspy, wheezy, screechy and high-pitched.

'If You Don't Like a Dog That Barks, Get a Cat'

It's uncertain who coined this phrase, but it's perfect because it makes the point that barking is a very normal, natural canine behavior. Dogs bark as a way to communicate, and they have different barks for different occasions:

- **Hello barking** — If your dog shows excitement when he encounters other people or dogs, his body is relaxed and he's wagging his tail, the barking he does at those times is his way of being neighborly.
- **Distress barking** — If your dog barks at what seems like everything — every movement or every noise he's not expecting — he's distress barking. His body is probably held stiffly during this activity and he may jump forward a bit with each bark.
- **Territorial barking** — Your pup considers your home, yard, car, his walk route and other places he spends a lot of time, his territory. If your dog barks continuously when a person or another animal approaches his domain, he's communicating that a stranger is invading his turf.
- **Look at me barking** — Some dogs bark simply for attention — from you or another animal. Your dog might also bark in the hopes of getting food, a treat or some playtime. The more you reward the behavior by giving him what seeks, the more likely he'll be to continue to bark for attention.
- **Communal barking** — If your dog answers when he hears other dogs barking, it's a social thing. He hears the barking of nearby dogs, or even dogs at some distance, and he responds in kind. This type of social barking is often heard at animal shelters and boarding facilities.
- **Obsessive barking** — If your dog barks repetitively, perhaps while performing a repetitive movement like running back and forth along the fence in your yard, he's demonstrating a bit of an obsession. You might want to try to find a better outlet for his energy — like a walk or a game of fetch.
- **Let me outta here barking** — If your dog is behind your fence and another dog passes by within view, your pup might bark excessively to signal his frustration that he can't greet his buddy out there on the sidewalk. This type of barking is usually seen in dogs who are confined or tied up to restrict their movement.

As you can see from this list, there are some types of barks (i.e., obsessive and "let me outta here" barks) that require your attention in the form of environment or lifestyle changes that help soothe your dog and reduce or eliminate her need to bark. And then there are the barks that serve no real purpose and require an intervention.

Don't Punish Your Dog for Barking — Reward Him for Silence

"The idea is not to prevent the dog from barking, because barking is a natural behavior and a means of communication for dogs," says veterinary behavior expert Dr. Nicholas Dodman, founder of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, "but rather to train the dog to stop barking on cue."⁴

This training will be easier if you're starting with a puppy, but it can also be done with older dogs. Obviously, if your pet is still a pup, you'll need to train yourself first to ignore his yipping so as not to reinforce the behavior. Keep reminding yourself those cute puppy barks will grow louder and more annoying as he enters adulthood. As Dodman points out, "You don't punish barking, you reward silence." It's an elegantly simple approach, but one many people overlook.

"There are many benign ways of training a dog not to bark," writes Dodman. "Most of them involve utilizing a voice command, such as No bark! Some of them simply entail patience, where you wait until the dog eventually does stop barking and then you reward it with some highly sought after treat ..."

If you're consistent in your response to your dog's barking, she'll start to reduce the length of time she barks. You may be able to speed up the process a bit by immediately following your verbal command to stop barking with words that indicate a treat is in the offing in exchange for her silence. When she starts barking, you say "No bark," followed immediately by "Want a treat?"

Gradually reduce the number of treats she receives until you're rewarding her with food only once in awhile, and be sure to use only tiny pieces of healthy treats. (However, remember to always reward her with verbal praise and petting when she does what you ask her to do.)

Dodman also points out that some dogs may require negative reinforcement (which is not the same as punishment) through the use of a head halter with a training lead. When the dog barks, tension is applied to the training lead to remind him he's performing an undesirable behavior. The reward for his silence is release of tension on the lead.

"Most owners make the mistake of feeling that they have to chastise or otherwise punish their pup for barking but the commotion and anguish that this causes does little to improve the situation," writes Dodman. "In fact, in yelling at a dog that is barking may seem to it as if you're barking, too."

Additional Tips to Discourage Excessive Barking

- If loud noises set your dog off, a crate of his own that he can go in and out of at will, coupled with soothing music or a television on in the background can help. Tips and tricks for crate training your dog (including fearful dogs).
- If he's barking out of boredom, increase his exercise and playtime, take him on walks or to the dog park, or find other activities that give him both the physical activity and mental stimulation all dogs require to be well-balanced individuals. The best way to create a quiet dog is to exhaust her with exercise.
- Changes in your pet's routine and environment can cause stress, so as much as possible, stick to a consistent daily schedule he can depend on. You might also consider talking with an **animal behavior specialist** about desensitization and counter conditioning exercises for a stressed out pet. Lifelong socialization and positive training are also essential for your dog's mental and emotional well-being.

Sources and References

¹ [Detroit Free Press, May 25, 2018](#)

^{2, 3} [AVMA.org \(Archived\)](#)

⁴ [PetPlace \(Archived\)](#)
