

This Body Part Gives You a Window to Your Pet's Soul

Understand this part of your pet's body and you may gain new insight into your dog or cat's innermost feelings, moods, and emotional state — and help you communicate. But don't let it confuse you. Four of the most common questions owners have and how to get started reading this important body part.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs chase their tails for a number of reasons ranging from a relatively simple-to-fix problem with anal glands or flea allergy dermatitis to the more challenging canine obsessive-compulsive disorder
- In some kitties, an excessive amount of sebum is secreted at the base of the tail, leading to a greasy tail
- Happy tail syndrome occurs most often in large dogs with thin, smooth tails that wag them so wildly they get injured
- 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

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Your dog's or cat's tail provides a window to his soul, such that once you learn to decipher its "language," observing this body part can help you communicate with your canine or feline pal. Fear, excitement and irritation are just a few of the emotions your cat can display with a twitch of his tail.

Your dog, too, can display happiness, friendliness, anxiety or dominance depending on the position and movement of his tail. But just as your pet's tail can lend you clues about his mood and emotional state, it can also be a source of confusion for pet parents.

The Truth About 4 Common Tail Questions

Have you ever wondered why your dog chases his tail or why your cat's tail is oily? Perhaps you've heard the terms "gay tail" and "happy tail syndrome" and wondered what they mean. Here we set the record straight on these four common tail questions.¹

1. **Why does my dog chase his tail? —** There are many reasons for this curious behavior, ranging from a relatively simple-to-fix problem with anal glands or flea allergy dermatitis to the more challenging canine obsessive-compulsive disorder.

One study revealed dogs were more likely to chase their tails if they were separated earlier from their mothers

and had shy personalities, and less likely to do so if they took vitamin and mineral supplements, suggesting the behavior is affected by environmental factors.²

Research published in the Journal of Small Animal Practice (JSAP) even linked tail chasing in dogs with elevated cholesterol levels,³ likely due to it causing disturbances in hormones, like serotonin, which are involved in mood and behavior.

They suggested increased exercise might help to stop the chasing. Then again, a dog who chases his tail may simply be a dog with a high predatory drive and no outlet to live out this chasing instinct.

In some dogs, the behavior can become obsessive and lead to **anxiety** and medical issues, so if you have concerns about your dog, see a holistic veterinarian for help.

Consistent, daily and intense exercise can help these dogs, along with dietary intervention (improving nutrient digestion and assimilation, which also improves the microbiome).

There may also be a genetic component; Bull Terriers and German Shepherds are among the breeds most likely to chase their tails, so early intervention as soon as the behavior is exhibited is a very wise decision.

2. **Why does my cat have an oily tail? —** Sebaceous glands at the base of your cat's tail secrete an oily substance known as sebum. In some kitties, an excessive amount of sebum is secreted, leading to a greasy, and oftentimes smelly, tail.

The condition is especially common in intact male cats, which is why it's referred to as "stud tail," but it can occur in any cat (including females and those who have been neutered).

Overactive sebaceous glands in your cat's chin is a similar condition, leading to **acne** and sometimes a greasy material on the chin.

Disinfect the area with either dilute povidone iodine (Betadine) or any gentle, organic soap on a daily basis. You can also dab on a little colloidal silver, fresh aloe gel or witch hazel, which is a natural astringent.

If your cat has intermittent recurring stud tail or acne, you can proactively swab the base of her tail or chin with a cotton ball dipped in witch hazel or hydrogen peroxide once a week to prevent or control flare-ups.

Adding in a source of omega-3 essential oils, such as krill oil, can also be very beneficial.

3. **What is gay tail? —** If you've ever heard the term "gay tail," used among breeders and people in the show circuit, it refers to a tail that's carried very high or over a dog's back.

In some breeds, like Doberman Pinschers or the American Pitbull Terrier, a gay tail is considered to be an undesirable trait (at least according to breed standards) because it disrupts the line of the back, preventing it from continuing straight through to the tail.

In other breeds, however, a gay tail is expected and preferred. This includes breeds such as Akitas and Beagles.

If you plan to show your dog, you may be penalized for your dog displaying, or not displaying, a gay tail. But

for most pet owners, the term can simply be taken to mean a tail that's held high, signaling alertness and engagement.⁴

4. **What is happy tail syndrome?** — Happy tail syndrome is a nickname for a condition most often seen in large dogs with thin, smooth tails, like Labrador retrievers, Great Danes, Greyhounds and Pit bulls, which wag them so wildly they get injured.

The caudal vertebrae in your dog's tail consist of between five and 20 tiny bones along with a hearty supply of blood vessels, covered only in short hair or thin skin.

The force a large dog uses to wag its tail can easily cause damage, especially when it occurs over a prolonged period of time against a hard surface like a kennel or a fence.

Also known as kennel tail and bleeding 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.

What Is Your Pet's Tail Trying to Tell You?

In general, dogs may wag to the right side when they encounter something pleasant, but when they see something threatening, for example, a strange dog exhibiting dominant behaviors, they wag more to the left side.⁵ What else might your dog be telling you with his tail?⁶

- A tail held high is a sign of alertness and sometimes dominance. The dog will release more of her scent from her anal glands this way, thus making her presence known.
- A tail held high and wagging (with a soft face) is often a sign of happiness, but also alertness (if the face is taut).
- A tail held horizontal to the ground means your dog is exploring.
- A dog that tucks her tail between her legs or wags it low to the ground and quickly may be showing you that she's nervous, anxious, insecure or feeling shy (the tucked-in position also prevents her scent from being released).

Cats also reveal **silent messages with their tails**. If you see your kitty's tail doing the following, now you'll know what it means:

- When your cat's tail is held high, he's feeling cheerful. If it quivers as well, he may be excited and anticipating something good.
- If your kitty's tail is held beneath him or puffed up, it's a sign of nervousness or fear.
- A tail held low to the ground may indicate wariness or annoyance, which can move quickly to aggression; if your cat's tail begins lashing back and forth, watch out.

Sources and References

^{1, 4} [VetStreet March 1, 2016](#)

² [PLOS One July 26, 2012](#)

³ [Journal of Small Animal Practice March 2, 2009](#)

⁵ [Current Biology, Vol. 23, Issue 22, November 2013](#)

⁶ [Animal Planet Dog Behavior \(Archived\)](#)
