EAR CROPPING IN DOGS

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ABSTRACT

Ear cropping in dogs is a cosmetic surgical procedure that carries pain, recovery and welfare concerns. This article explains the procedure, commonly cropped breeds, risks, behavioural concerns, legal status and reasons veterinary and animal welfare organizations oppose it.

KEYWORDS-animal care, dog welfare, dogs, ear cropping, veterinary

ABSTRACT

Cropping is the removal of part or all of the external flaps of an animal's ear. The procedure sometimes involves bracing and taping the remainder of the ears to train them to point upright. Almost exclusively performed on dogs, it is an old practice that was once done for perceived health, practical or cosmetic reasons. Veterinary science states there is no medical or physical advantage to the animal from the procedure, leading to concerns of animal cruelty over performing unnecessary surgery on animals. In modern times, cropping is banned in many nations, but is still legal in a limited number of countries. Where permitted, it is seen only in certain breeds of dog, such as pit bull and bull terrier type breeds, the Doberman Pinscher, Schnauzer, Great Dane, Boxer and Cane Corso.

Keywords: ear cropping, dog, veterinary, surgery, practice, breeds

INTRODUCTION

Though dogs have been bred to have a wide range of ear sizes and shapes, there’s still a large population of dogs who are subjected to a surgical ear alteration called “ear cropping.” Banned in multiple countries, this cosmetic procedure has too much risk and too little benefit for the modern dog.

Though becoming less popular with pet parents and even some breed enthusiasts, myths about the benefits of ear cropping still make this procedure a welfare struggle in the U.S.

Ear cropping refers to surgically cutting away the outer ear (pinna) to alter the ear’s shape. This is usually done either with scissors or a sharp blade. Depending on the extent of the procedure, the tissue may be closed with sutures or with surgical glue. In some dogs, the remaining tissue is then positioned with tape and bandages to encourage the appearance of a pointed ear. In others, nearly the entire outer ear is removed.

Cropping is usually performed on puppies who are 6–12 weeks old because it allows for further development of the ear after surgery. It’s also believed that older animals suffer more from the pain of the procedure.

While a procedure such as this should only ever be performed by a licensed veterinarian under general anesthesia, it’s not unheard of for unscrupulous breeders to crop ears at home without

pain control.

COMMON BREEDS AND HISTORICAL PRACTICE

Most ear cropping is performed to achieve a specific appearance and is extremely uncommon in mixed-breed dogs. Common breeds to exhibit cropped ears are:

- Doberman Pinschers
- Great Danes
- Mastiffs
- Pit Bull Terriers

Doberman and Great Dane ears are generally left long and pointed while the “Bully” breeds will frequently have very little of their outer ear left.

Historically, ear cropping in some breeds was used to reduce injury in dogs expected to live a violent lifestyle. Dogs used in dogfighting and bear baiting (both now-illegal sports) were cropped to keep the opponent from grabbing onto a long pinna.

Dogs who were used for protection had their ears cropped to create a more aggressive appearance. Cropped ears became an expected appearance for these breeds and is perpetuated now only to harken back to those standards.

MEDICAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

While some claim that cropped ears are medically beneficial (such as to avoid ear infections and injuries), there’s no evidence to support this. There is also a myth that cropping a dog’s ears helps with hearing, but the pinna is extremely important for hearing acuity in mammals, so it’s more likely that the reverse is true.

Anesthetic and post-operative complications from ear cropping—especially when not performed by a veterinarian—are well documented. Normal post-operative pain and/or complications such as infection during the time when a puppy is most impressionable (8–10 weeks of age) can negatively (and permanently!) affect how a puppy interacts with their environment and family.

Puppies and adult dogs use their ears for communication. Though in-depth studies have not been performed, it is suspected that ear cropping can actually hinder inter-dog and dog-human communication, resulting in fear and anxiety behaviors. This negative result has been documented in a closely related procedure: tail docking.

Due to the risks and lack of clear medical benefits, veterinary groups including the American Veterinary Medical Association, American Animal Hospital Association, and Canadian Veterinary Medical Association actively oppose the practice. Ear cropping is illegal in the United Kingdom, and the Royal Kennel Club will not allow cropped dogs to be shown in their rings.

In short, ear cropping is a purely aesthetic procedure and there is no medical benefit to cropping the ears of a dog. Though most purebred puppies will have their ears cropped prior to going to their forever home, it’s worthwhile as a dog-lover to find a breeder who does not commit to these standards.

LEGAL STATUS AND WELFARE CONCERNS

Ear cropping is illegal in England and Wales, under Section 5 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. However, the practice is still legal in other parts of the world, such as the USA and Russia. There's a fear that more and more dogs are being sent abroad for cropping, or being purchased and imported from overseas having already had the painful procedure.

It's not illegal to import a dog with cropped ears from another country. Those who support the practice claim ear cropping can prevent ear infections and avoid sustaining injuries from other animals or dogs. However, this is completely untrue. Cropping doesn't benefit the dog in any way and can actually be detrimental to their health, behaviour and welfare.

The procedure is usually carried out for purely aesthetic or cosmetic reasons often because the owner wants to achieve a particular 'look'. Some owners believe cropped ears make the dog look tougher or more intimidating, but the process can have the completely opposite effect on their temperament and can make them anxious and nervous around people and other animals.

DISCUSSION

Ear cropping is generally done on puppies between six and 12 weeks. It's increasingly popular in certain breeds and types of dogs - including cane corsos and American bullies, where part or all of the entire ear flap is commonly removed. This can be extremely traumatic for the puppy and cause permanent damage.

In some countries, cropped ears are considered a breed standard for some bull-breeds. Other breeds, such as Dobermans, have their ears cropped and splinted.

The fashion for taping or splinting promotes a false aesthetic where dogs' ears look permanently alert and therefore more 'attractive'. A dog's ears are taped to a cardboard or wood splint to encourage growth upright instead of the ears flopping over.

There is no evidence of any benefit to performing cropping or taping of dogs' ears unless for medical reasons.

As with any surgery, there are risks and ear cropping is an incredibly painful procedure for the dog. This is especially true if carried out as a DIY procedure without prescribed anaesthetic or pain relief. The wounds can take a long time to heal, need a lot of aftercare (such as changing dressings and cleaning) and can become infected easily.

We fear that celebrity culture, images shared on social media - especially from abroad where the practice is unregulated and legal - and an increase in bull breeds seen in advertising is normalising the look and making it more popular.

People in the public eye are endorsing this procedure by sharing pictures of their cropped dogs and, even if unknowingly, normalising and glamorising the look. They need to take responsibility and set a good example to their fans, promote responsible dog ownership and champion good animal welfare.

RESULTS

Certain dog breeds, like Doberman Pinschers and Great Danes, that we've all come to recognize for pointy ears are actually born with naturally floppy ears. These dogs are given erect ears via an elective, cosmetic surgery known as ear cropping.

What You Should Know About Ear Cropping

What Is Ear Cropping?

Ear cropping is a veterinary surgical procedure called cosmetic otoplasty. The surgery removes part of all of a puppy's auricles or pinnae, which are the external, visible flap of the ears.

Is Ear Cropping Necessary?

Ear cropping was once performed for perceived practical benefits. However, we now know that ear cropping offers dogs no physical, medical, or environmental advantage. Ear cropping is not medically indicated and is a completely elective procedure. Ear cropping is performed solely for cosmetic reasons with the intent of meeting certain breed standards.

Like all surgical procedures, ear cropping involves a painful recovery and carries the risks inherently associated with surgery and general anesthesia. These risks include potential reactions to medications, the possibility of infection, and blood loss.

Which Dog Breeds Have Cropped Ears?

Where ear cropping is legally permitted, it's only typical for puppies of certain breeds to have their ears cropped. These breeds include:

- American Staffordshire Terrier
- Boxer
- Doberman Pinschers
- Great Dane
- Pitbull
- Schnauzer

Should Your Puppy's Ears Be Cropped?

Deciding whether or not your puppy's ears should be cropped is a very personal decision. The choice depends on your puppy's health and how important it is to you that your dog meets specific breed standards. For most owners, it comes down to whether they intend to show their dogs or keep them simply as companions. Our veterinarian can help you decide which option is best for your dog and lifestyle.

When to Crop a Puppy's Ears

The age at which a puppy's ears are cropped depends greatly on the puppy's breed and individual development. However, we typically will not crop the ears of any puppy over five months of age.

EAR CROPPING AFTERCARE AND FOLLOW-UP

Without proper care, the perfect ear cropping can still result in floppy ears. It's essential that clients follow our veterinarian's aftercare instructions and schedule follow-up appointments as instructed. We'll ensure your puppy's ears heal properly, help you avoid infection with proper wound care, and guide you through the healing process.

Anatomically, all mammals have the same neurological architecture, made up of neurotransmitters and receptors which contribute to higher brain functions. So although puppies may respond differently to pain, they most definitely experience both the sensory and motor components and the emotional and cognitive aspects of pain.

During early life, the brain of a puppy is still developing, which means that the trauma associated with ear cropping has the potential to negatively affect the pain tolerance of the puppy – these effects can be seen throughout the entirety of its adult life.

Furthermore, this surgical mutilation is commonly performed during the socialisation period and so also has the potential to affect the dog's emotional development alongside the ability to express natural behaviours.

IMPORTANCE OF BEHAVIOUR

Behaviour is the outward manifestation of emotions and therefore is extremely valuable when interpreting the emotional states of an animal. The expression of natural behaviours is usually accompanied with changes in body posture and facial expressions, where these cues are commonly used as predictive indicators about mood and emotional state.

Contributing to a dog's facial expression are the ears, where their position, also known as ear carriage, can signal a number of emotional states. Consider the various positions a dogs ear can take, from soft and low against the head, to forwards whilst the base is held upright and even sometimes pinned back tightly against the head. Each of these diverse ear carriages communicates something different, from fear and anxiety to desire-seeking and social play.

However, the loss of a key communication tool due to ear cropping means that dogs are limited in their ability to use body language to express their emotions and this can lead to a selection of behavioural responses which humans and other dogs may consider to be unexpected and difficult to interpret. Inability to use body language to accurately express emotions can lead to dogs being exposed to situations that they find challenging and can increase sensations of discomfort and expressions of distress.

CALL TO ACTION

Considering all of the consequences associated with ear cropping, is it really appropriate to force certain dog breeds to appear a certain way?

The practice of ear cropping is illegal in the UK, but at this moment it’s not illegal to sell ear-cropped dogs or import them from abroad, and it's not a specific offence to take dogs abroad to be cropped. The #CutTheCrop #FlopNotCrop campaign by BVA and the FOAL Group is calling for the closure of all legal loopholes affiliated with this trend, sign the petition to support the campaign.

I strongly urge all dog owners, animal lovers, and members of the public to first and foremost educate themselves and then work to educate others in order to prevent the normalisation of this practice. It is vital to actively support this call to action to #CutTheCrop to prevent our companion animals from unnecessary life-long suffering.

CONCLUSIONS

Ear cropping in dogs is not recommended and is strongly opposed by major veterinary and animal welfare organizations (such as the American Veterinary Medical Association and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)).

Key Reasons Why Ear Cropping Should Not Be Done:

- **No Medical Benefit:** Veterinary science confirms that ear cropping is a purely cosmetic procedure with no health, physical, or hearing advantages for the dog.
- **Pain and Suffering:** The procedure involves cutting off a sensitive part of the dog's ear flaps (often when they are young puppies), causing severe pain, trauma, and risks of bleeding, infection, and poor healing.
- **Impaired Communication:** Dogs use their ears extensively to express emotions (such as fear, anxiety, playfulness, or confidence) and to communicate with other dogs and humans. Cropping interferes with this natural signaling.
- **Legal Restrictions:** Because it is considered an unnecessary form of animal mutilation, ear cropping is illegal in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, and many European countries.