

Tail Docking in the Epagneul Breton

By: Susan Geske, PhD., DVM

The Epagneul Breton pup looks promising. Flashy markings, good birdiness, bold, healthy, and growing like the proverbial weed. But ... his tail looks like it belongs to a Springer Spaniel or perhaps more like an American Brittany! This usually results from a lack of precise communication of the breeder to the vet, and a lack of experience of some veterinarians in working with the Epagneul Breton breed, since the breed is still a relatively recent arrival in our country. Perhaps there was a new veterinarian at your normal practice or your regular veterinarian was out of town when the litter was born. Maybe your instructions to cut the tail “kinda short, but not too short” weren’t explicit enough. Or worse, the litter was whisked away by the veterinary technician without any input from you, the breeder, who just assumed the veterinarian knew what needed to be done. This article is for the breeder who may have a veterinarian that is new to the Epagneul Breton breed, commonly referenced as the French Brittany.

It is important to stress to the veterinarian that your breed standard favors and prefers tails that are shorter than those often seen on the American Brittany. You might even take a copy of the official UKC breed standard to the first tail docking appointment with your veterinarian, and take a moment to discuss it. The official United Kennel Club, Inc. Conformation Standard for the Epagneul Breton as revised March 1, 2007, provides in pertinent part that ... “The Epagneul Breton can be born tailless or with a very short tail. When the tail is docked, the ideal length is from 1.18 to 2.36 inches (3 to 6 cm). The docked tail should not exceed 3.93 inches (10 cm).” This is in accord with the standard employed in Europe. In my experience working with the breed, there is more often a preference towards the suggested ideal length, than towards the maximum allowable length expressed in the breed standard.

First, there are a variety of methods to dock a dog’s tail. The following is the way I do it. The results are generally pleasing to the eye, and more importantly, comfortable for the dog. I dock puppy tails when the pup is two days old. No exceptions; even if this means a Sunday afternoon tail docking session. I do this for several reasons - the pup is easy to handle, the tail is small, and the pup’s pain response is minimal. A good relationship with your vet, and perhaps a plate of cookies or jar of homemade jam, will go a long way in getting him or her to dock tails on a Sunday afternoon!

Some veterinarians advocate injecting a bit of lidocaine under the skin where the docking will occur. A 10:1 mixture of lidocaine and injectable sodium bicarbonate may take the sting out. I sometimes place a dime underneath the tail, adjacent to the perianal region, to have an aid to estimate the correct length. Apply a straight hemostat across the tail. Using a number 10 or 11 scalpel blade dock the tail. Retract the skin on the cut tail to expose the vertebra. Use a pair of very sharp scissors to dissect out the remaining partial vertebra. Do not cut the skin. Often it is impossible to dock a tail exactly between two vertebrae. Apply 1-2 drops of surgical glue to close the skin. I also place a cruciate suture at the end of the tail. It is at the veterinarian’s discretion to use absorbable or non-absorbable suture. Either one works well.

Once the docking is done, the breeder’s responsibilities are just starting. It is imperative to check the pup’s tail every few days. Ensure that the tail skin is still closed and does not appear to be wet, swollen or inflamed. The mother dog may lick the tails obsessively. If this happens, the skin at the end of the tail may be “pushed back” and the vertebra will be exposed. This could create multiple problems, not the least of which is infection.

Many dog owners have seen docked tails where the tip of the tail has no hair growing. This may occur from either obsessive licking from the mother or from the last vertebra rubbing up against the *inside* of the tail skin. This is why it is important to dissect out any partial end vertebra in the tail prior to closing the skin. Otherwise, redocking the tail may be necessary. The blunt end of the vertebra and the padding from the skin will allow hair to grow and keep the tail pain free in the adult dog. This method will result in beautiful, proper length tails for the Epagneul Breton

About the author: Dr. Susan Geske has an active veterinary practice known as Double Diamond Veterinary Hospital in Bozeman, Montana. She focuses much of her work in the area of canine sports medicine, rehabilitative therapy and preventative medicine. She enjoys working with the gun dog breeds, and in her professional practice she has frequently worked with the Epagneul Breton breed. This article was published in **l'Epagneul Breton**, and is reproduced here by the foundation as an educational resource with the author's express permission.