



The WSAVA AWWC (World Small Animal Veterinary Association's Animal Wellness and Welfare Committee) Position Statement on Cosmetic Alterations in Companion Animals

The WSAVA AWWC is strongly opposed to any physical alterations of an animal's body for cosmetic or behavioural reasons. Physical alterations to animals are unacceptable unless performed by a licensed veterinarian for reasons of health, or welfare. Spaying and neutering, as well as permanent identification (tattoos, ear tipping, microchipping) for the purpose of returning lost animals to their guardians, are exempt from this position due to the associated welfare benefits to both individual animals and population management.

Cosmetic alterations include convenience surgeries such as caudectomy ("tail docking"), cosmetic otoplasty ("ear cropping"), ventriculo-cordectomy ("debarking" or "devocalisation"), and onychectomy ("declawing"). Additionally, tattooing, dental cropping or cosmetic dentistry, body piercing and any other forms of cosmetic physical alterations are considered ethically inappropriate. Such procedures confer multiple harms upon animals including hospitalisation, acute and chronic pain, inflammation, infection, and anaesthetic risks, without any benefits. Several convenience surgeries such as devocalisation or de-clawing, inhibit the expression of natural behaviours, and expression of symptoms of behavioural frustration without offering appropriate alternative opportunities for behavioural expression or coping with emotional frustration, increasing the risk of negative emotional experiences for the animal.

Many people believe that when cosmetic surgery is performed during the animal's developmental/neonatal periods, negative side effects are minimised, but this may not be true. Neonates have similar, if not increased, sensitivity to pain compared with adults (Noonan et al., 1996; Fitzgerald et al., 2020), although this may vary between species. An early pain experience may sensitise neonates to subsequent pain, decrease pain threshold, and alter brain development increasing vulnerability to stress disorders and anxiety-mediated adult behaviour (Mellor, 2018).

- The WSAVA is concerned that prioritisation of convenience surgeries and cosmetic alterations over good behavioural, physical, and emotional states demonstrate a lack of recognition of the intrinsic value of animals as sentient beings and sends the message that they are commodities to be altered and exploited in line with the preferences of people.

Tail docking and ear cropping are the most common examples of cosmetic alterations in dogs. The tail is a functional limb with complex anatomy, and amputation of the tail in puppies results in severe pain (Noonan et al., 1996; Mellor, 2018). Transection of the four nerves in the tail results in the formation of four potentially painful neuromas and a potential source of chronic pain. Neuromas may be associated with neuropathic pain which may include numbness, tingling, hypersensitivity and actual pain, all of which can result in chronically poor welfare and self-injurious behaviour. Neuroma formation and pain-related behaviour including severe self-injury are documented in dogs after docking.

The development of neuropathic pain can be prevented only by the administration of appropriate analgesic (pain-killing) and anaesthetic drugs, including specifically ketamine plus a local anaesthetic (Wagner et al., 2002; Goldberg, 2017). Even with anaesthesia and analgesia, post-operative pain after tail docking or ear cropping will occur as the healing of bone, cartilage and skin damage takes some weeks.

Body language is used by dogs as a primary form of communication with other dogs and also with people. Social communication in dogs relies on proper observation of tail and ear signalling, and so both ear cropping and tail docking may impair social communication in dogs. Tail docking and ear cropping greatly reduce a dog's ability to communicate how they are feeling and can send inappropriate messages causing stress, anxiety and tension between dogs.

- The WSAVA opposes tail docking and ear cropping surgeries unless there is a medical reason to do so. If these procedures are deemed medically necessary, then appropriate anaesthesia and pain control must be utilized and the procedure performed by a licensed veterinarian.

Declawing (onychectomy) is the most common example of physical alterations for behavioural reasons in cats. Declawing is not just removal of the claw, it is a surgical procedure that involves amputation of the entire last joint (phalanx) of each toe. This surgery may create long term welfare problems and nonmedical onychectomy is banned in many countries around the world, due to its negative impacts on cat welfare. These include acute and chronic pain, and increased risk of unwanted behaviours including urinating and defecating outside the litter box, excessive grooming, biting, and aggression. Scratching is a normal feline behaviour and veterinarians are obliged to provide cat owners with complete education about declawing and effective alternatives such as provision of suitable surfaces for scratching, regular nail trims, application of synthetic nail caps, the use of synthetic pheromones to minimize stress, and environmental enrichment. Declawing should only be considered if there is a medical condition such as a tumour, infection or other medical condition that requires surgical intervention. The risk of relinquishment for destructive behaviour or other reasons should not be used as a rationale for declawing as it has not been shown to be a consequence of these behaviours (Ellis et al., 2022).

- The WSAVA opposes onychectomy for non-medical reasons. If this procedure is deemed medically necessary, then appropriate anaesthesia and pain control must be utilised, and the procedure performed by a licensed veterinarian.

All veterinarians have an ethical obligation to act in the best interest of their patients, and the majority of veterinary oaths/declarations include a commitment to animal welfare and a responsibility to prevent suffering. For example:

"... I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering" AVMA

*"...ABOVE ALL, my constant endeavour will be to **ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care.**" RCVS*

*"I will use my knowledge and skills for the benefit of our society through the **protection of animal welfare and health**, the prevention and relief of animal suffering" WSAVA*

- The WSAVA believes that dogs and cats are sentient beings and have the capacity to suffer. Whenever animals are under human care, their welfare must be ensured and their suffering prevented.
- The WSAVA encourages all Kennel Clubs and Companion Animal Associations and groups to phase out any breed standards that require cosmetic mutilations and to take a health-focussed approach to breed standards

Veterinarians should educate not only their clients and pet owners/guardians about the harm that these procedures can cause, but also counsel them on how to improve their animal's welfare and living conditions.

- The WSAVA believes that all veterinarians have a responsibility to lead and advocate for the best possible welfare outcomes for our companion animals.

References:

- Ellis, A., van Haften, K., Protopopova, A., & Gordon, E. (2022). Effect of a provincial feline onychectomy ban on cat intake and euthanasia in a British Columbia animal shelter system. *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*, 24(8), 739-744.
- Fitzgerald, A. J., Barrett, B. J., Gray, A., & Cheung, C. H. (2020). The Connection Between Animal Abuse, Emotional Abuse, and Financial Abuse in Intimate Relationships: Evidence From a Nationally Representative Sample of the General Public. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 0(0), 0886260520939197. doi:10.1177/0886260520939197
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- Noonan, G., Rand, J., Blackshaw, J., & Priest, J. (1996). Behavioural observations of puppies undergoing tail docking. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 49(4), 335-342.
- Wagner, A. E., Walton, J. A., Hellyer, P. W., Gaynor, J. S., & Mama, K. R. (2002). Use of low doses of ketamine administered by constant rate infusion as an adjunct for postoperative analgesia in dogs. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 221(1), 72-75.

Additional resources:

- WSAVA Animal Welfare Guidelines and Animal Welfare Charter ([link](#))
- European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals ([link](#))
- Animal Welfare Act, 2006, UK government ([link](#))
- AAHA position statements and endorsements; declawing, ear cropping and tail docking ([link](#))
- CVMA ACMV Cosmetic Alteration-Position Statement ([link](#))
- BCSPCA Position Statement on Cosmetic and Other Non-therapeutic Alterations ([link](#))
- AAFP Position Statement on Declawing ([link](#))
- JAVMAnews 3/1/20, AVMA revises declawing policy ([link](#))
- WSAVA World Congress Proceedings, 2001; Cosmetic Surgery in North America and Latin America ([link](#))

- AVA Board, 03, August 2018; Cosmetic surgery to alter the natural appearance of animals ([link](#)) and Surgical alteration of companion animals' natural functions for human convenience ([link](#))