



### **Why I Decided to Crop**

I did not take my decision to crop ears lightly. Having been raised in the West Coast of the United States, a hotbed for animal rights, and having studied in the United Kingdom, the birthplace of animal rights, I have been more than exposed to the other viewpoints concerning cosmetic surgery in animals. During veterinary school many of my classmates quickly decided against the procedure, siding with many other graduating 21<sup>st</sup> century veterinarians. Many of my veterinary colleges state that: the dogs are in pain from the cropping procedure, they miss their ears, or that ear cropping is not medically indicated. I hesitated to condemn the practice. After great consideration I have decided to crop the ears of some of my Neapolitan Mastiff puppies because I feel that when done correctly the procedure is safe and I want to maintain the historic look of the Neapolitan Mastiff.

When the procedures are performed under general anesthesia with appropriate analgesia the dogs are not in excessive discomfort. If the procedure is done early, between 2 to 4 months the puppy heals quickly. Dysphoria alone is often the only response and this discomfort and anxiety is common after any anesthetic procedure such as a spay or neuter. These common well-accepted procedures hold similar surgical risks as ear cropping in regards to the inherent risks of anesthesia, blood loss, and infection. Preoperative multimodal pain control that blocks the pain pathway in multiple locations, followed by a couple of days of basic analgesia can more than

adequately control any pain or discomfort. With appropriate antibiotics to prevent infection and appropriate post-op hygiene, the aftercare also creates little discomfort.. The extra attention needed for appropriate aftercare also has the side benefit of helping the puppy become accustomed to being touched and treated; in a breed that, when unruly, often has to be sedated or anesthetized to be examined or treated, this conditioning can be invaluable.

Puppies do not miss their ears, tails or dew claws any more than they miss their uterus, ovaries or testicles. This is simply an example of anthropomorphism, an endearing human habit, but not a serious cause for concern. Removal of the ears can affect the non-verbal signals in dogs, but this trait is desired in the guard dog that often has to obscure its intentions and educated owners can easily compensate for this minor change in non-verbal behavior.

One of the last points concerning ear cropping is the belief that the procedure is not medically necessary. Typically, like the spay or neuter, cropping ears is done before health issues arise and not always in the face of disease. Cropping the ears changes the morphology of the ear and increases airflow to the deeper canals; this open type of morphology has been shown to help prevent *otitis externa*<sup>1</sup>. Chronic ear infections can create a longstanding painful medical condition, where surgery is often required to open up the ear canal and improve the condition. In addition to ear infections, ear hematomas are another painful condition of the ear. Removal of a large portion of the pinna helps prevent ear hematoma formation. Although I am not advocating cropping all dogs' ears to prevent disease, dogs that are cropped as per the breed standard, can have these beneficial medical side effects.

After considering these concerns and concluding they did not provide enough reason not to crop, I had to address the reasons why I wanted to crop, because in some ways I do enjoy those big floppy ears. I eventually decided to crop because I did not want the tradition and heritage encompassing a cropped animal to be lost forever. I am a big fan of natural history and native cultures; many indigenous peoples practice self-modification using neck rings, lip plates and earpieces that distort their physiques. Many of these cultures begin these practices early, long before consent is possible. While I cannot condone all body modification acts, to me it would be wrong to ban practices such as nose piercing or lip plates; every culture has it's own set of beauty standards and many North Americans practice similar, socially accepted, methods of body modification. Even though I may not choose these practices for myself, I know these

modifications represent an important aspect of the cultural heritage and tradition of many cultures.

For me ear cropping and tail docking holds the same traditional context. I recently watched the 1995 TV miniseries "Pride and Prejudice" and I could not help but feel disappointed upon seeing the English Springer Spaniels with tails and the Great Dane with floppy uncropped ears. The two dogs were present simply to stage the scene, but knowing that in the early 1800's dogs were cropped and docked I felt let down with the portrayal. The obvious anachronisms were perhaps no more serious than hearing the phone ring or seeing a modern doorbell but they left me thinking about what was lost. In the same note, that loss of tradition was seen in other places. Sure there is something to be said about the practicality of Catholic Mass being done in English, but one of the most moving moments of my life was experiencing Mass in Latin, even if I only understood half of what was being said. Every mass does not need to be done in Latin, but we will have lost something wonderful if one day that custom can no longer be found somewhere on this planet.

That same sentiment occurs to me as I think about ear cropping. Many breeds are currently modified so that they can more closely adhere to the traditional breed profile. Cropping may no longer be necessary for breed functionality as many working breeds no longer perform their breed intended job but maintaining the look of the breed by cropping is just as important as maintaining the phenotype assessed by conformation. Many opponents of cropping feel that breeding dogs with long backs, which are prone to disc disease, or brachycephalic heads, which can lead to breathing problems, are equally wrong and these breeds should be altered or abolished. Many of these very same opponents of cropping even oppose dog ownership itself, believing that it is cruel to own another living thing. As a veterinarian, dog breed fancier and loving pet owner I simply cannot subscribe to those trains of thought. What I do support is continued breeder and owner education to improve the health, welfare and understanding of the pure bred dog. Many national clubs are working with breeders to help improve the general health of their breed while maintaining the correct breed phenotype and I feel this same energy should be directed towards cropping procedures. By encouraging appropriate cropping procedures for show dogs and owners interested in preserving the cultural heritage, the health and welfare of the puppies can be maintained. Although not common, the practice of cropping by non-veterinarians should be discouraged to ensure the health and welfare of the puppy; only a licensed veterinarian

can administer the appropriate multimodal pain medication and supportive anesthetic protocol that are essential for pain control. The veterinarian and breed fancier must be willing to work together to ensure that the appropriate style is achieved and that adequate post-surgical care is maintained. Only when breeders, veterinarians and fanciers stand together, condemning inadequate backyard practices and encouraging appropriate anesthesia and pain control, can the opposition take us seriously.

With appropriate surgical technique, anesthesia, analgesia and post-operative care the ear cropping procedure can be performed with little discomfort. Not every puppy will be cropped but those that are will help maintain the historic look of the breed so that when they are brought into the ring or shown to other fanciers the full impact of the Neapolitan Mastiff can be appreciated. To me, the beauty of a Neapolitan Mastiff's square head, cropped ears and piercing gaze is like hearing a beautiful hymn, sung in Latin, resonating through a grand European cathedral.

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## **References**

1. Hayes HM Jr, Pickle LW, Wilson GP. Effects of ear type and weather on the hospital prevalence of canine otitis externa. Res Vet Sci. 1987 May;42(3):294-8.