How to Perform Surgical Tail Docking in Draft Horses

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Draft horse tails are commonly docked. The need to dock the tail of an adult draft horse occasionally occurs. Surgical amputation will produce a cosmetically docked tail. Author’s address: Arthur Veterinary Clinic, R.R. 1 Box 122 H, Arthur, IL 61911. © 1999 AAEP.

1. Introduction
Custom dictates that tails are docked in many draft breeds. A high percentage of draft horses shown in halter and hitch competition have bobbed tails. Commonly, breeders will dock the tails of foals within 2 weeks of birth using elastrator bands, allowing the tails to necrose and fall off. Occasionally, a client will present an adult draft horse and request cosmetic tail docking. In this case, surgical tail docking is performed on the standing horse as opposed to banding the tail. This procedure is also effective when surgical amputation of the tail is warranted because of trauma and/or infection.

2. Methods
Surgical tail docking is performed on a standing horse within restraint stocks. Heavy sedation is achieved throughout the procedure using detomidine 2.2 to 4.4 µg/kg IV. Anesthesia of the surgical site is achieved by an aseptic caudal epidural using a combination of xylazine 50 µg/kg and 2% lidocaine q s to 6 ml. A tourniquet placed high around the tailhead serves as the best means of controlling hemorrhage during the surgical process.

Determining the desirable length of the tail can be the most challenging aspect of the surgery; however, the following technique has proven to be the simplest and most efficient method. The tail is firmly grasped at its most proximal portion. The intercoccygeal space approximately 15 cm from the tailhead is palpated, identified and marked. This landmark will become the last coccygeal vertebrae of the docked tail. If the determined length appears too short, the next intercoccygeal space is identified and will become the end of the docked tail. Tail hairs are clipped 3 to 4 cm cranial to the marked intercoccygeal space and as far caudally as needed, being certain to leave adequate tail hairs above the surgical site for cosmetic purposes. These hairs are wrapped up and kept out of the surgical field.

After aseptic surgical preparation of the site, the favored intercoccygeal space is once again palpated. A surgical incision is made on the dorsal surface of the tail in a U shape beginning at the level of the intercoccygeal space and extending approximately 4 to 5 cm from each lateral side of the tail toward the center while still remaining on the dorsal surface. This procedure creates a flap of skin that can then be folded over the end of the tail toward the end of the surgery. The soft tissue underlying the skin flap is bluntly dissected, permitting the flap to be displaced.
out of the way. The ventral surface of the tail is incised in a circular fashion extending from each lateral side toward the other.

A no. 10 surgical blade is then used to incise the intercoccygeal space on the dorsal surface; at the same time, bending pressure is placed at the point of the intercoccygeal space. With the intercoccygeal space exposed, the remaining soft tissue, including muscles, nerves and blood vessels, is sharply incised to permit complete removal of the caudal portion of the tail. Ligation of blood vessels is not necessary if skillful tourniquet placement and postoperative bandaging techniques are implemented.

The skin flap created earlier is then folded over the end of the tail and sutured to the ventral skin surface using no. 2 nonabsorbable suture in a simple interrupted pattern. The skin edges generally come together neatly, and the surgical incision heals exceptionally quickly. Before removal of the tourniquet, the surgical site is bandaged with gauze 4 × 4s, vetrap, and 4-in stretch tape. The bandage should be changed at least once during the first 48 hours of postoperative care.

3. Results
The result of surgical tail docking is a clean incision that heals by first intention, resulting in a cosmetically docked tail.

4. Discussion
The draft horse community is a small but thriving part of the equine industry comprising multiple-generation breeders, exhibitors (at both hitch and halter), pulling competitors and hobbyists. The draft horse functions primarily as a work horse but also serves as a companion animal in parades, weddings and exhibitions. The draft horse industry has seen steady growth in recent years, as indicated by increased sales and transfers of horses. First-time horse owners and long-term equine enthusiasts alike are buying draft horses because of the breeds’ gentle nature, versatility and popularity. Not only is our practice composed of at least 50% draft horses, but all three veterinarians within the practice are actively involved in the draft horse industry through breeding, exhibiting and promoting. Therefore, we are familiar with common practices and norms. In our experience, draft horse clients, especially show horse people and breeders, tend to consent to commonly accepted procedures. More than likely, especially if you practice in the Midwest, you will have some clients who own draft horses, and you may be asked to dock a tail. As in many instances in equine medicine, your ability and willingness to perform particular procedures may gain you a long-term client. Surgical tail docking in draft horses by this method has provided our practice with quick, efficient and successful results. We certainly hope this insight will do the same for others’ practices.