

Amputation

What is Amputation

Amputation involves the surgical removal of a body part that is diseased or damaged beyond salvage. In dogs, the parts more commonly amputated are a limb, toe(s), or the tail. It should be remembered the docking the tail of newborn pups is an act of amputation.

The aim of amputation is as a salvage procedure to prevent pain or suffering by removing a damaged body part or to prevent the spread of certain aggressive forms of cancer. This is a surgical procedure commonly undertaken in first opinion practice.

Whilst amputation may seem a radical option to us, dogs do not seem to experience the same mental sense of loss as humans, and the vast majority adapt extremely well to the loss of a limb. Indeed there is a saying in veterinary circles that dogs have "Three legs and a spare."



Amputation Procedure in Dogs

This is a surgical procedure that requires full general anesthesia. First the patient should be thoroughly assessed to check there are no other treatment options and that amputation is the most humane treatment. In the majority of cases where amputation is necessary, the dog hasn't been using the limb for some time. This means once the anesthetic and discomfort of surgery has worn off, the majority of dogs adjust remarkably well. Indeed, some are noticeably brighter and more mobile than pre-surgery because they no longer experience pain or discomfort from the diseased limb.

Efficacy of Amputation in Dogs

Key to successful surgery is selecting those cases in which amputation is the best option. In these cases, the majority do very well afterwards and readily adapt to life without the missing body part. Obviously, amputation is irreversible so it is not undertaken lightly. Also, using effective pain relief prior to surgery is important to reduce the risk of 'phantom limb pain' afterwards. This is a condition in which the dog experiences ongoing stimulation of the nerve roots, despite the limb's removal. In some cases, amputation can be life-saving, such as the patient with a complex fracture where the only other option is euthanasia, or in the cancer patient with an aggressive osteosarcoma where removal of the primary tumor reduces the risk of spread.

Amputation Recovery in Dogs

The vet will supply effective pain relief to be given to the patient at home. If the surgery was lengthy, or the dog has a weak immune system, then a course of antibiotics may be prescribed. The dog is liable to be quiet for a few days after what is major surgery. Provide soft, padded bedding and encourage the dog to lie with the affected side uppermost. It may be necessary to support the dog in a sling improvised from a towel slung under their belly when the dog goes to the toilet for the first few times after surgery. The dog must wear a cone to prevent them from licking or chewing the surgical site. The owner should be vigilant for any discharge from the surgical site, such as blood or pus, and contact the clinic if they are concerned. Other signs to be alert for include swelling, excessive bruising, or the wound opening up. The dog requires a check-up three days after surgery, and provided the recovery is uneventful, the sutures are removed 10 to 14 days post surgery.

Dog Amputation Considerations

Animals do not experience the same psychological hang-ups about amputation that people do. After a short period of adaptation, most dogs do very well indeed. During the recovery period, it is essential to maintain good hygiene of the pet's bedding and surroundings so that the wound does not become infected. If surgery was performed to prevent cancer spreading, then follow-up radiographs or imaging of the chest or liver may be advisable three months later.

Amputation Prevention in Dogs

Prevention of amputation is often not possible, as it is a last resort treatment. However, in some cases amputation may be performed due to financial constraints, such as when the cost of specialist fracture repair are prohibitive. In these cases, another course of action other than amputation may be possible when financial products are available to manage the cost of treatment.