

## Dr. Mike Paul, DVM

Mike has more than 35 years of experience in companion animal veterinary practice and is a valued member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team since 2013.

"Cold water tail," "limber tail syndrome," "broken tail," "dead tail," "broken wag," and "sprung tail" are all euphemisms for a relatively common occurrence in sporting dogs like [Labrador Retrievers](#), [Golden Retrievers](#), [Setters](#), [Pointers](#), [Flatcoats](#), and [Foxhounds](#). In this painful syndrome, the [tail](#) of the dog hangs down from the tail base or is held horizontal for three or four inches and then drops down.

This sudden-onset condition appears to be very painful, but is a relatively benign affliction that can occur after [swimming](#), after a heavy hunting day or even after a bath with cold water or water that is too warm. It is not always associated with swimming or water, but it can happen after a heavy day of work that involves a lot of tail action. Almost all affected dogs will return to normal within a few days.

### Causes of limber tail syndrome

Most [veterinarians](#) are aware of the condition but it is unclear what causes the condition. It can look like the tail is indeed broken. However, the damage is not to the tail bone, but the tail muscles. The syndrome seems to be caused by muscle injury possibly brought on by overexertion, says Janet Steiss, DVM, PhD, PT. Steiss is an associate professor at [Auburn University's College of Veterinary Medicine](#) and [co-author of the 1999 study on limber tail](#) that pinpointed the nature of the muscle damage. Researchers used electromyography (EMG) imaging and tissue testing on dogs affected with limber tail and concluded that the coccygeal muscles near the base of the tail had sustained damage -- it's the equivalent of a sprain. Although the cause may not always be clear, overexertion is often the culprit. Just as with their guardians, sometimes dogs pay for their weekend fun in strains and sprains.

### Diagnosis of limber tail syndrome

Unfortunately some veterinarians and many guardians are not familiar with the condition and it may be mistaken for something far more serious. While a limp tail can indicate an actual broken bone or spinal injury

or other problem, the clinical presentation of the syndrome has a rather typical sudden presentation: the affected dog's tail was fine, and then it wasn't. This information might help your veterinarian in making a diagnosis. Careful palpation and radiographs will rule out a fracture.

### Treatment of limber tail syndrome

Generally, the syndrome resolves itself with rest within a week or so. Keep affected dogs quiet until the tail returns to normal. Your vet may prescribe some mild painkillers to ease the soreness. There is anecdotal evidence that administering anti-inflammatory drugs early in the onset can help shorten the duration of the episode, but no veterinary studies have yet confirmed this. The condition may or may not occur again.

### Prevention of limber tail syndrome

Get your dog accustomed to vigorous activity. Ease your dog into any intense activity to slowly improve his condition. Many cases occur when a dog is a couch potato in the off-season and then plunges back into hunting or training full time.

### Questions to ask your veterinarian:

- My dog is refusing to wag his tail since we got back from a week at the lake -- what might be happening?
- My dog was diagnosed with "sprung tail." Is it likely to reoccur? How can I prevent it?

*If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian -- they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.*