



Swimmer's tail

Swimmer's tail is a layperson's term for a condition called acute caudal myopathy which causes a tail to suddenly become limp and often painful. It can also be known as limber tail, cold water tail, dead tail, limp tail, rudder tail or broken wag. The condition mainly affects working dogs and hunting dogs, but it can affect any breed.

What causes swimmer's tail?

The condition typically results from a strain of the tail muscles due to overuse such as from prolonged swimming (especially in cold water) or excessive tail wagging. The symptoms typically appear very rapidly within 24 hours, however in some cases there may be a delay between the causal activity and signs arising; many dogs will wake up the next morning in pain.

How is swimmer's tail diagnosed?

Most dogs will present with a limp tail ranging from completely flaccid to just the tip being affected. The dog may yelp when lying down or defecating and can often be restless or unable to settle. Dogs may try to chew at the tail and the hairs on the top of the tail may be raised due to swelling. Some dogs may struggle to stand easily or balance as the tail is used for both, and they may be off their food due to the discomfort.

Diagnosis is generally through a careful clinical examination and history, however x-rays may be recommended to rule out other causes of tail pain such as tail fractures.

What else might cause a limp tail?

Other conditions that can cause a limp tail include:

- tail fracture
- lower back pain
- infection or inflammation of the anal glands
- prostate disease

How is it treated and prevented?

Generally, the condition will resolve with strict rest and painkillers for up to 14 days, however this can be challenging if the cause is over-wagging the tail. Warm compresses can help to ease discomfort. Dogs can be more prone to repeat incidences of the condition if they have experienced it before, however many dogs will never have another episode. Try not to let your dog over-exert themselves, especially swimming, if they are not used to it. There is no way to stop a waggy dog wagging though!