

# What Animal Lovers Need to Know About Devocalization



*The family that bought Phoebe didn't know her breeder had her devocalized. Thanks to this cruel surgery, her voice is permanently hoarse. She gags on food—and even water.*

## **Meet Phoebe and other devocalized dogs:**

Search *Faces of Devocalization* on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

## **Hear what animal experts say:**

Search *Unkindest Cut Devocalization* on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

Sometimes dogs and cats must undergo vocal cord surgery to treat disease, like cancer, or to correct a birth defect. But when performed for the sole purpose of suppressing the animal's voice—called devocalization—this practice is widely considered an act of cruelty. Long banned throughout the UK and now in Massachusetts, devocalization subjects animals to pain and stress along with many risks, some life-threatening. Helpless to refuse this unnecessary surgery, they receive no benefit, not even the assurance of a home: Devocalization is selfishly performed for convenience and profit, often to facilitate a breeding business or a hobby involving dogs or cats.

## **FAQs**

### **Is devocalization the same as debarking or bark softening?**

“Debarking” doesn't accurately describe this surgery, which alters *all* vocalization, not just barking. Some animals are left completely silent. It is also done to cats—who don't bark!—though less often than dogs. “Bark softening” is spin. It's a meaningless term created to sanitize an act of cruelty.

### **What does a devocalized animal sound like?**

Devocalized voices are typically described as “disturbing.” These animals may sound:

- Raspy and hoarse, like they have laryngitis.
- Wheezy, like they have asthma.
- Shrill and screechy.
- Usually without vocal distinctions that communicate different meanings.
- Often accompanied by persistent coughing and/or gagging.
- Some animals are rendered completely mute.

### **Who would have a dog or cat devocalized and why?**

- **Breeders**, when they or authorities don't tolerate the sound of their many animals.
- **Show dog exhibitors**, to keep dogs quiet in transit between shows or in the ring.
- **Sled dog racers**, because dogs in a pack tend to vocalize more.
- **Dog fighters** and those who hoard or “collect” many animals, to hide their activities.
- **Occasionally, selfish or uninformed pet owners**, because this dangerous surgery is easier for *them* than responsible selection, care, training and housing of an animal.

### **How is devocalization done?**

Vocal cord tissue is cut using one of two methods:

- Through a surgical incision in the neck (laryngotomy) **OR**
- By inserting instruments through the mouth.
- The veterinarian may use a scalpel, scissors, biopsy tools or even laser. The result is the same: Soft tissue is cut or otherwise altered, subjecting animals to surgical risks and potential complications that may compromise them for life or result in a terrible death.

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*Scar tissue blocked Stella's airway after a breeder had her devocalized. Corrective surgery funded by her adopter saved this gentle Lab's life, but nothing could save her voice. Stella is permanently mute.*

### What are the risks of devocalization?

- **All** devocalization procedures carry risks, such as blood loss and infection.
- The risk of **infection is greater** for devocalization than other types of surgery due to the large number of bacteria in the oral cavity and throat.
- The potential for **internal scarring is greater** with the **less invasive** method, in which vocal cords are accessed through the mouth.



*Porter's breeder had him devocalized, then didn't want him. Massive scarring after his vocal cords were cut—through the oral cavity, the **less** invasive approach—put Porter at risk for heat stroke and aspiration pneumonia. Though his adopter paid for corrective surgery, Porter will never again bark **or** breathe normally. He's the lucky one. Two devocalized kennel mates had to be euthanized. One died from aspiration pneumonia.*

### What is the danger of scarring in the throat?

Scar tissue blocking the airway may not be evident until years after the devocalization. The animal then may:

- Struggle to breathe, particularly during exercise or in warm weather.
- Gag on food and water.
- Cough persistently.
- Die from choking, aspiration pneumonia or heat stroke.
- Be at greater risk during future medical procedures requiring anesthesia.
- Require corrective surgeries, with additional stress, pain and risks.



*Demi, whose breeder had her devocalized, spent the first few years of her life in a cage. She was spayed after being given to a rescue group; scarring from the devocalization made it difficult to keep her airway open during the procedure. Demi can't bark at all, only whine, and just a little exercise stresses her—results of vocal cord surgery she didn't need and was helpless to refuse.*

### Does the veterinarian's skill or the instrument used remove risks?

Surgical risks and potential complications, such as airway obstruction, are present regardless of the vet's skill, level of experience or the instrument used (scalpel, scissors, biopsy tools or laser).

### Is recovery from devocalization surgery painful?

Although most animals are anesthetized during the procedure, anyone who has undergone throat surgery (or suffered strep throat!) can attest: Recovery is very painful. People can manage their own pain with medication or other palliative measures. However, animals rely on the goodwill and responsibility of their owners; not all dogs and cats receive proper post-operative care or pain relief.

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*Lady was left at a shelter **after** being devocalized.  
She was adopted—and given up again.*

### **Does devocalization keep animals out of shelters?**

- Shelter executives say no. They testified that devocalized animals are given up for the same reasons as any other.
- Cutting vocal cords to mask vocalization enables owners to ignore the underlying reason, typically boredom, loneliness or other distress. Allowing the animal's distress to continue may lead to behaviors for which they **are** surrendered, such as biting and house-soiling.
- Some devocalized animals are given to shelters and rescue groups when they can't be used for breeding, exhibition or sport—or sold.
- Devocalization may **increase** the risk of relinquishment or convenience euthanasia when an owner is unable or unwilling to pay for procedures to treat complications, which are common. Corrective surgery to remove scar tissue obstructing the airway is very expensive. Without it, the animal could die a premature and horrible death.



*Snow was chained outside all day, barking her loneliness and frustration. She was devocalized and then given up anyway, relinquished to a rescue group.*

### **Won't seniors have to give up their pets if they can't have them devocalized?**

- Eldercare and senior housing professionals testified that owner infirmity and financial concerns, **not** the dog's barking, are the reasons seniors surrender pets.
- With its high risk of complications, devocalization could further strain the finances of those on fixed incomes, resulting in relinquishment or euthanasia of the animal.
- Loneliness, boredom and distress are the top three reasons dogs bark tenaciously, according to Pat Miller, CDBC, CPDT, a certified dog behavior consultant and past president of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers. Seniors typically spend ample time with their pets, providing the companionship that reduces or eliminates attention-barking.
- **Barking doesn't hurt seniors, but biting does. The dog who can't audibly and unambiguously bark a warning s/he's about to bite is a danger to the owner and others.** Seniors may not be able to hear or understand the muffled, indistinguishable sounds a devocalized dog makes. And experts say most people cannot interpret a dog's or cat's body language; who would imagine a wagging tail could mean "stay away"? Seniors with reduced vision or impaired cognition are even less able to recognize non-vocal signs of imminent attack.

### **What about spay/neuter—isn't it more invasive than devocalization?**

That's a hollow argument made by those who profit from devocalization. Veterinarians and shelter executives testified before the Massachusetts legislature that devocalization subjects animals to serious risks but **no** benefit, not even a secure home. In contrast:

- Spay/neuter benefits animals by reducing the risk of certain cancers.
- Spay/neuter benefits society by reducing pet overpopulation.
- Spay/neuter reduces excessive vocalization triggered by hormonally driven excitement or aggression.

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## Isn't devocalization important for good relationships with neighbors?

Access to devocalization **discourages** the responsible animal care essential for harmony between neighbors. Even devocalized animals may jump on people, dig up the garden, or soil the neighbor's yard or public property. Unaltered animals, devocalized or not, may be aggressive or produce unwanted litters that burden municipal pounds. These behaviors are prevented by training, responsible care and supervision, not vocal cord surgery.

## Isn't devocalization a better option than electronic collars?

**Neither** is a good option. But while electronic collars can be dangerous, the risks of vocal cord surgery—including airway obstruction, blood loss and adverse reaction to anesthesia—are far greater. Collars are easily removed. Internal scarring, a common complication of devocalization that can result in lifelong suffering or a terrible death, can only be removed with more surgery.

## So what's the alternative? Responsibility!

- Don't keep groups of animals for breeding or sport, or get a pet predisposed to frequent vocalization, if you, a family member or neighbors do not tolerate the sound of barking or meowing.
- Spay/neuter at the appropriate age to reduce the hormone-driven aggression or excitement that may trigger frequent vocalization.
- Provide sufficient exercise, companionship and play: Bored, lonely dogs bark more!
- Rule out medical reasons for frequent vocalization, and consult a behavior specialist to resolve psychological or environmental triggers. Cutting vocal cords instead leaves the animal in distress, which s/he may then express in other ways, such as biting.

## How many devocalized animals are there? Sadly, many more than you think.

In a year of canvassing for Logan's Law, which prohibits canine and feline devocalization in Massachusetts, members of the Coalition to Protect and Rescue Pets discovered hundreds of devocalized dogs and some cats statewide. The scope of this cruelty is likely far greater but can't be quantified because those who order and those who perform devocalization rarely disclose it. They've kept it under the radar with good reason—devocalization is a shameful practice.

And it's easy to hide. Unlike tails and ears that have been surgically shortened (docked or cropped) for so-called breed aesthetics, cut vocal cords are not visible. Most people assume the dog or cat they hear rasping, wheezing, coughing and gagging has laryngitis or kennel cough.

*Few imagine the cruel reality: The animal's vocal cords were cut for an owner's convenience.*

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Veterinary information reviewed by Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association

## Use Your Voice to Protect Theirs. Ban Devocalization.™



IN MEMORY OF LOGAN

This proud show dog's breeder had him devocalized, then abandoned him when he stopped winning blue ribbons. Though he tried valiantly to bark like his rescuer's other dogs, Logan could only rasp and wheeze, cough and retch until the day he died.