

Ear disease in your dog

Ear disease, sometimes called otitis by your vet, is very common in dogs. In some dogs ear disease can become an almost permanent problem and surgery may be needed in some severe cases to help reduce the symptoms.

Causes

- A dog's ear canal runs in an L-shape towards the ear drum. Some dogs also have large hairy ear flaps which results in a warm moist environment in the ear canal, making it ideal for bacteria and yeasts to grow.
- Foreign bodies (usually grass seeds) can get stuck in the ear canal and infections may develop.
- There is even a type of mite which lives inside the ear canal.
- Dogs with allergies will be prone to ear inflammation and infections.

Often it is difficult to find the original cause of the ear disease but because your dog's ear is itchy, he scratches at it and sets up an infection.

Signs

- Head shaking
- Scratching at ears
- Rubbing his head along the ground
- Smelly discharge
- Black or excessive wax
- Head tilt

Why can't my vet just prescribe some treatment over the phone?

- Even if your dog has repeated problems with his ears there is no guarantee that each episode is caused by the same thing. It is very important that your vet looks inside your dog's ear with an instrument called an otoscope, to check for damage deep within the ear, and to look for foreign bodies such as grass seeds. Failure to remove a foreign body can result in permanent damage to the ear.
- The inside of the ear is very sensitive and many dogs will not let your vet do this unless they have been sedated or even anaesthetised.
- Also many of the medicated ear drops are toxic to the middle ear which is exposed if the ear drum is not in tact. Hence this must be checked by your vet.

Treatment

Treatment will vary depending on the cause of the problem.

- Obviously a foreign body will have to be removed
- Specific treatment may be required for mites or nasty infections
- Your vet may need to take samples from your dog to decide which is the best treatment to give. Your vet will probably prescribe ear drops and possibly also some tablets.
- Unless the ear is clean the ear drops cannot work. It may be necessary for your vet to admit your dog to the hospital and flush out its ear canals before treatment starts. In less severe cases, your vet will show you how to use an ear cleaner on your dog.

Always make sure you follow your vet's instructions carefully. You must complete the treatment course even if the ears seem to be much better within one or two days.

I already have some ear drops - can I use those?

NO! Never put anything into your dogs ear without first consulting your vet. Even if the drops were prescribed for your dog in the past they may do more harm than good on this occasion. Many types of ear drop 'go off' once they have been opened, or it may be that the ear problem is caused by something different this time. Remember that ear disease is very itchy and can be very painful - you must always seek veterinary treatment sooner rather than later for the sake of your pet.

Don't wait to seek veterinary help

It is unlikely that the ear disease will get better on its own. The longer you leave it before starting treatment the harder it becomes to clear up the irritation. Each time ear disease develops, more damage is done and eventually the walls of the ear canal may become thickened. This makes further infections more likely as fresh air cannot get to the bottom of the ear canal. When ear disease keeps coming back, surgery may be needed to remove part of the wall of the ear canal so that treatment can get to the site of infection.

Prevention

Unfortunately it is impossible to prevent ear disease coming back in some dogs. In fact if your dog has had one ear infection, it is highly likely that they will have repeated bouts. You should check your dog's ears regularly and contact your vet if the ears become red or sore looking.

Regular ear cleaning can be helpful in removing debris and wax within the ear, but excessive cleaning may damage the inside of the ear and make infection more likely. Unless advised otherwise by your vet, clean your dog's ears about once a week.

Avoid swimming as water in the ear canals may encourage bacteria and yeasts to grow.

If your dog has hairy ear canals the hair should be **plucked or trimmed** to allow good ventilation. In severe cases when ear infections are recurrently affecting your dog's quality of life, your vet may recommend an operation called a **Total Ear Canal Ablation (TECA)**. This involved removing entire ear canal and 'cleaning' out the middle ear to remove the problematic area and prevent further infections

Conclusion

In most cases of ear disease the symptoms will clear up within a few days of treatment starting. Unfortunately this is not the end of the problem. It is highly likely that the problem will come back at some stage in the future and you should be on your guard for it. If the problem recurs, seek advice from your vet as soon as possible because if the disease is allowed to go untreated for any length of time, permanent damage may result.