

Ear problems in pets

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Timmy came in, shaking his head and looking distinctly uncomfortable. When his head was touched, he winced, and a foul odour came from his ears. I checked his ears with an otoscope and saw ulcers in his ear canal, the cause of his pain. We flushed his ears with a medicated wash and gave him injections for the pain and infection, with take home antibiotics, painkillers and ear solutions.

Ear infections are one of the most common problems we see in practice. The ear canal in pets is L or J shaped, making it prone to infections. The most common symptom of ear infections is a ear discharge, scratching of the ears, foul or yeasty odour and evidence of pain (head shaking, holding the head on one side or whining when ears are touched). The colour and type of discharge can tell us a lot about the type of ear problem. The discharge can be waxy due to inflammation when excessive wax is produced due to irritation. Brown wax is a sign of inflammation, while black wax or a discharge which looks like coffee grains may be a sign of ear mites (*Otodectes mites*). A purulent ear discharge is due to a bacterial infection, while yeast infections cause a brown discharge with a yeasty odour.

Some breeds of dogs - ones with long, dangly ears such as Cocker Spaniels and Basset hounds are more prone to ear problems than others. Shampoo or dirty water entering ears (if your dog goes swimming) may also be a cause of infection.

To successfully diagnose and treat problems with the ear it is always recommended to bring your dog or cat to a vet, since ear infections don't usually clear out on their own, and the longer you wait, the chances of the problem requiring invasive or surgical intervention increases. If your cat/ dog is found to be suffering from an ear problem, the best course of treatment for the individual case will be prescribed, which need to be tailormade for individual cases. Your vet will start with a physical examination, including an otoscopy if necessary, followed by flushing out the ear canal to clear out any debris or pus. This is usually followed by sending the sample of the ear discharge for a cytology and/ or a bacterial culture and sensitivity. The ear discharge is tested for ear mites, yeast or fungal infections and bacteria.

Treatment depends on the test report and includes ear washes, ear drops and appropriate oral and injectable medicines to tackle the infection. Reducing pain and inflammation is very important in ear infections since inflamed ears can worsen existing infections. There are solutions that break down biofilm that is created by the bacteria so that antibiotic ear drops can act better; these should be used every 4- 5 days in bacterial infections.

Ear tumours:

Just like any other part of the body, the ear canal can also get tumours. These could be benign (warts) or malignant and need to be checked by a Vet who will advise the next step.

Complications and consequences of ear infections:

Aural Hematoma: This is when excessive scratching of the ears leads to capillary damage, and blood seeps out and collects into the ear flap. If this happens, your Vet will drain out the blood a few times before deciding if a

surgery is indicated to close the dead space in order to avoid further collection of blood. This is a painful surgery involving multiple sutures on the pet's ear, so it is best to avoid it by taking treatment for itchy ears.

Aural resection or Total ear canal ablation (TECA):

These are surgical techniques to open out the affected ear canal to air in order to prevent recurrent ear infections. This is done if the ear infections are chronic, resistant to antibiotics or narrowed (stenosed) due to inflammation, infection, warts or growths.

To sum it up, make it a part of your grooming routine to check the ears regularly. Keep the ears clean and if you spot a problem contact your vet immediately.