

Many breeds of dogs with pendulous ears or hairy inner ear flaps are unfortunately susceptible to ear problems. Some breeds (such as Labradors, Retrievers, Bulldogs, Cocker Spaniels and Poodles) can also produce an abundance of wax that needs regular attention.

Cats and kittens are not immune to ear infections, although generally their upright ear growth and dislike of getting wet works in their favour.

SIGNS OF AN EAR PROBLEM

Despite being in pain, your pet is unfortunately not able to tell you they have a problem – it's up to you to keep an eye out for the any signs that they're distressed.

You may notice your pet shakes their head more frequently or rubs their ears along the furniture and carpet. This is an attempt to relieve the itching. Their inner ears may also look red and inflamed. A discharge from the ears, an unhealthy smell, and not responding to everyday sounds are also signs that there is something amiss that needs immediate attention.

When seeking treatment, act quickly. If your dog has an ear infection, they will be in considerable discomfort. Additionally, left untreated, ear infections can be a cause of deafness.

CAUSES OF EAR PROBLEMS

Allergies

Ear infections are often an indication of other problems such as an underlying allergy. In fact, allergies are quite common in dogs and cats, and one of the main causes of ear problems. Food or agents in the environment, such as pollen and grass, can cause inflammation throughout your pet's body, including their ears.

Moisture

Water can easily get into your pet's ears during bath-time or while they're swimming. This moisture creates a perfect environment for an infection to develop. Even dogs that don't swim can have ear problems during the warmer months due to our high humidity.

Poor air flow

Another common cause of ear infection is an accumulation of wax, matted hair, debris or a foreign object lodged in the ear canal. This can reduce air flow and increase moisture, encouraging the development of ear problems. Not all dogs grow hair in their ear canals, but those that do will benefit from regular plucking.

Ear Mites

These are a common parasite that are highly contagious, often contracted from pet to pet. Excessive itching is the most common symptom. Ear mites create dark, crumbly debris that look like coffee grinds.

Aural Haematoma

Any ear problem can lead to excessive head shaking. This shaking (or trauma to the ear area) may result in damage to the blood vessels in the ear flap (the pinna) causing blood to accumulate under the skin, and all, or part of ear flap to thicken. This is known as a Haematoma. It's a painful condition that will require draining to relieve the pressure, followed by surgery to reattach the cartilage and maintain the correct ear shape.

Left untreated the blood in the ear flap will gradually be re-absorbed over the next 2 to 6 weeks. This will be uncomfortable for your dog and can result in a permanent deformity of the ear flap known as "cauliflower ear" which may cause further problems.

As a haematoma is often set off by infection, mites, fleas or debris, the initial cause will also require treatment to prevent a reoccurrence.

Deafness

Deafness is typically a problem in senior pets, however it can also be hereditary or congenital. Coat colour in dogs and cats is linked to congenital deafness in nearly all cases. White cats, especially those with blue eyes are 50% more likely to be born deaf. Although white and merle dogs are also prone to deafness, the likelihood of them being deaf in both ears is still well below 10%. Unfortunately, deafness present at birth is not reversible.

In your pet's adult years, deafness can be brought on by many factors - trauma, loud noise, brain disease, tumours, infection or simply as a normal part of aging. You may notice your pet no longer responds to their name or is not woken by loud noises. Diagnosis of the underlying cause will determine if medical intervention will be helpful. Once diagnosed it is important to consider your pet's safety and modify their lifestyle accordingly.

- They will be unable to hear an approaching car or you calling them at the dog park, so off-leash activities for dogs and outdoor access for cats should be avoided. (Vibrating collars may be an option)
- Modified communication methods will need to be taught with emphasis on hand signals instead of voice commands.
- You may notice your pet sleeps more. This isn't through need - they just aren't woken by your presence, so you will need to wake them. Do this gently as they can be easily startled.
- Congenitally deaf pets also lack skin pigmentation required to protect them against sunburn. Limit their hours in the sun and use pet sunscreen to prevent skin cancer.

WHAT CAN I DO TO STOP EAR PROBLEMS DEVELOPING?

If your pet is one of those prone to problems, there are a few things you can do at home to help keep their ears healthy:

- Regularly pluck excess hair from the ear canal. Good air circulation will help reduce bacteria.
- Always dry their ears after bathing and swimming. Yeast and bacteria love a moist, humid environment.
- Carefully monitor for the early stages of inflammation:
- Regularly rub your pet's ears – if they seem sensitive, it's time to take a closer look.
- Check inside the ear flap. The skin should be pink and clean, with no excessive debris or wax. A light coating of yellowish wax is ok. Some dogs, and cats, need the wax cleaned out daily, others never have a problem.
- Now have a sniff - your pet's ears should smell clean; healthy ears don't have an odour.

CLEANING YOUR PET'S EARS

You'll only need to clean the ears if you notice a problem, such as head shaking, an unhealthy odour, or if they look dirty or more waxy than usual.

You may want to go outside to clean your pet's ears or have a towel handy - your pet will shake their head and things can get messy. Make sure the cleaning solution you use has a neutral pH - don't use alcohol or witch hazel as they dry the ear out and sting if your dog has any abrasions. You'll need some gauze or a tissue to wipe the ears out afterwards – we don't recommend using cotton-tips as they can drive dirt and debris deeper into your pet's ear canal.

- Remain calm - your pet can sense if you are nervous, and it will be more difficult to apply the treatment.
- Invert the ear cleaner bottle and squeeze about 1ml into the ear canal (the bigger the ear, the more you will need).
- Massage the ear area to help work the cleanser deeper into the ear canal. If there is enough in the ear, you will hear a "squishing" noise as you massage. This will help loosen any debris inside.
- Now stand back and let them shake.
- Using your finger wrapped in the tissue or gauze, wipe away any remaining cleanser.
- Remember to praise and reward your pet afterwards.

If the smell or symptoms continue or worsen it's time to see the Veterinarian. A deeper clean or medication may be required.

TYPES OF INFECTIONS

Infection of the external ear canal (Otitis Externa) and middle ear (Otitis Media), are usually caused by yeast or bacteria.

Yeast is opportunistic - it lives on your pet's body at all times without causing any problem. However, it loves a warm and moist environment, and if your pet's immune system is not functioning properly, an infection can develop. If you have been keeping your pet's ears clean and dry and they are still having problems, an underlying health issue may be the reason.

Bacteria is classified in two groups, the good guys - those that live on your pet's body (non-pathogenic), and the villains - introduced (pathogenic) bacteria, for example, from dirty pond water. Good bacteria present on your pet helps protect them from an infection, but it can also grow out of control and cause problems if their immune system is out of order.

TREATMENT

If an infection is present, your veterinarian may take swabs from the ear canal to be examined under the microscope. This will help identify what type of infection is present. A bacterial infection may also require a laboratory culture to be performed, to further determine which antibiotics will most effectively treat it. A yeast infection will require antifungal medication.

It may take several visits to ensure an infection is fully cleared, and it is best not to stop treating the ears until they are absolutely healthy. Regrowth of resistant bacteria can result in a much more serious problems.

Treating the immediate symptoms will relieve your pet's discomfort. However, without addressing any underlying causes a recurrence may soon occur – allergies or systemic diseases will also need to be addressed.

HOW TO ADMINISTER EAR DROPS OR OINTMENT TO DOGS

While your pet is being treated for an infection you may be required to clean the ears before administering the medication. Any builds up in the ear canal can prevent the medication from reaching the infected tissue, and provides material for an infection to grow in.

The method for administering drops or ointment is similar to that used for cleaning, with the exception of the amount being administered. Use the amount prescribed by the Veterinarian and give the medications for the full period recommended.

It's always best to finish the prescribed medications even if your pet seems to be doing well.