



Ear Infections

Ear infections (otitis) are a relatively common and bothersome problem for dogs. Most of the time, they are short-term and can be easily treated and cured. However, in some cases they can become chronic and recurrent. In these circumstances more complete investigation into the cause and longer term treatment plans are required.

Causes of Acute and Chronic Otitis

Causes of acute otitis include foreign objects such as plant material and stones, allergies, parasites, and water in the ear from swimming or bathing. Chronic and recurrent otitis can be caused by allergies, hormonal diseases, tumors, immune mediated diseases or incomplete/inadequate treatment of an acute infection. The underlying problem changes the environment in the ear allowing the development of bacterial and yeast infections.

Certain breeds are more predisposed to developing infections. Cocker Spaniels, Bassett Hounds and other floppy-eared breeds are at higher risk because of increased humidity in the ear canals when compared to dogs with erect ears. Dogs such as Poodles with excessive hair growth in the canals also may be predisposed to developing ear infections.

Allergies are by far and away the most common cause of chronic ear infections. Besides treating the infection component, the underlying allergy must be addressed or else the infection will continue to recur.

Clinical Signs

Ear infections can cause great discomfort to your pet. Typically the symptoms include: pain, redness, head shaking, scratching at the ears, drainage and a foul odor coming from the canals. On occasion the infection may move to the middle or inner ear. In these cases the symptoms may include deafness, inability to blink, tilting of the head to the side of the infection and loss of balance, circling, rolling or inability to stand.

Diagnosis

The diagnosis of an ear infection is based on the clinical signs the pet demonstrates, the physical examination by the veterinarian and the use of several diagnostic tools. In most cases we will start by using an otoscope to look down the ear canal. This allows us assess the amount of debris and inflammation present as well as inspect for foreign objects, ear mites, ticks and tumors. We also are able to evaluate the ear drum to see if it is intact or ruptured. In many cases the ear canal may be too swollen and painful to allow otoscopic examination. In this situation we try a short course of therapy to get the ear calmed down so a proper evaluation can be made. Unfortunately, even with appropriate therapy many dogs with chronic otitis have such pain and discomfort that general anesthesia is required for us to get a thorough evaluation and cleaning of the ears.

Another tool used in the assessment of the ears is cytology. This involves taking a swab of the ear debris and examining it under a microscope for the presence of mites, bacteria and yeast. The results of the cytology are of great importance in the selection of proper medications for treatment of otitis.

On occasion we may need to culture the debris from an infected ear. It is not a routine procedure as we save this for chronic and recurrent infections or when certain types of bacteria are seen on cytology. The results from the cultures help us select the proper antibiotic or antifungal therapy.

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As mentioned above, there are many causes of recurrent ear infections and other tests may be necessary to help determine the underlying cause of the otitis. Blood tests are necessary if hormonal imbalances (hypothyroidism, Cushing's disease) are suspected. Intradermal allergy testing and food trials are used to assess for an underlying allergy. Skin biopsies are used to evaluate for immune mediated diseases. CT scans are used to examine the middle and inner ears for involvement.

Treatment

In many acute otitis cases with no major underlying problem, a 2-3 week treatment course with a topical drop or ointment placed into the ear canal may be all that is necessary to clear the infection. If a foreign body, a tick or a very heavy buildup of debris is found, sedation will likely be required to remove the irritant or to allow a thorough cleansing.

When there has been a chronic infection, simple ear drops and ointments are usually inadequate to clear the infection. The ear canal has undergone many changes that make it difficult for topical therapy to be effective. They include swelling, glandular enlargement and a buildup of scar tissue. In these cases systemic medications (oral pills and capsules) will be necessary to treat the infection, underlying cause and correct the secondary changes. Antibiotics are used for bacterial infections and antifungals for yeast infections. Glucocorticoids such as prednisone or dexamethasone are often included to reduce the amount of inflammation in the ear. Therapy may be required for many weeks to get the ear canals back to normal.

If the ear drum is ruptured and the middle ear is involved, this situation may be even more difficult to clear up. Therapy may be required for several months to be sure the infection has cleared. Diagnosis and treatment may include lab tests, X-rays, CT scan and even surgery.

Prevention

Pet owners can help their pets avoid ear infections by practicing preventative care at home. This is especially important for those animals that are prone to developing ear infections such as those with pendulous ears, have lots of hair in their ears, or have allergies or other medical problems. A weekly ear cleaning at home with a veterinarian-recommended ear cleansing solution can minimize or prevent infections.

It is not wise to use cotton tip applicators in the ear canal as they tend to push debris further into the canal rather than lifting it out. We do not recommend using alcohol in a dog's ear. Alcohol will dry a moist ear, but if there is inflammation or abrasions in the canal, the alcohol will burn and cause tremendous pain and further inflammation.

Good preventative ear care save a lot of discomfort for your dog. Watch your dog carefully for scratching at its ears or shaking its head. If your dog is prone to ear infections, take the time on a regular basis to check the ears for redness, odor or the presence of exudate. If you determine there is a problem, please call us immediately so we can help you with the problem.

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