

Canine Ear Inflammation and Infection

08/22/2011



As a dog owner, you want your best friend to be stress-free and relaxed, not rubbing his ears on the living room rug, shaking his head or pawing his ears to stop the itching. You know he is uncomfortable. And, you want to relieve his distress as quickly as possible.

These telltale behaviors indicate your dog could be suffering from ear troubles.

"Other common signs of ear inflammation or infection include holding the affected ear slightly drooped, an ear discharge and odor that may be noticeable to the dog parents," explains Christopher G. Byers, DVM, American College of Veterinary Emergency/Critical Care and the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine at MidWest Veterinary Specialty Hospital in Omaha.

Ear problems can cause a great deal of discomfort for dogs. So let's get to the bottom of the problem to understand what you can do to help your dog.

There are three types of ear problems in dogs—those having to do with the outer ear, the middle ear, and the inner ear. Outer ear problems will be noticeable to observation, while the other two require the expert diagnosis of a veterinarian.

Air allergens, food, contact irritants, ear mite parasites and foreign objects can cause inflammation of the external ear canal, called otitis externa. When bacteria, yeast or parasites cause inflammation, it can turn into an infection.

To understand a dog's ear problems, be aware that a dog's ear canal is anatomically different from the human ear.

A dog's external ear canal has both vertical and horizontal components. That fact makes a dog's ear an easier target due to the shape of the ear. This structure predisposes dogs to ear inflammation and infections, as debris must work its way upward rather than straight out as in the human ear.

Gregg Hammer, DVM, and former president of the American Veterinary Medical Association in practice in Dover, Delaware, says, "A dog's ear canal is like an upside down horn of plenty with the small, narrow end toward the head. This explains why dog's ears are so difficult to treat."

Some dogs seem to be more prone to ear problems than others. And, there is a reason for that. Breeds such as the Chinese Shar-Pei, Bulldogs and Chow Chows tend to have narrow ear canals, and this anatomy predisposes them to more ear inflammation and possibly infection. Dogs that include Cocker Spaniels, Labrador Retrievers and Springer Spaniels tend to have more wax producing cells in their external ear canals making them more inclined to ear inflammation.

In addition, dogs with long pendulous earflaps, those dogs that live in humid environments, and dogs that love to swim are over-represented for ear inflammation.

But no dog beats out the Cocker Spaniels, as they are the poster "children" for ear inflammation, says Dr. Byers. "This breed may be affected by a condition of severe irritation of the external ear canal. We don't know the cause, however, but a primary glandular disorder is suspected. This breed is also over-represented for a skin disease called idiopathic seborrhea that may ultimately lead to excessive secretion of earwax that may also cause profound ear inflammation."

Of note, hair is normally present in the ear canal, and no study has correlated the increased number of hairs in the ear canal to the incidence of ear inflammation; so routine hair plucking is not recommended and may actually promote ear inflammation according to Dr. Byers.

Normally, ear problems can be cleared up with medications. But when that route doesn't work, dogs can suffer permanent damage.

"In our practice we see chronic severe ear infections that inflame the facial nerve that runs from the brain near the ear canal," says Dr. Hammer. "If scarring, inflammation and infection occur, it can affect the facial nerve. Ear problems that have gone on so long that the ear becomes calcified and bone-like often necessitate the removal of the entire ear canal called an ablation."

Dogs that have allergies are also more at risk of having ear troubles.

"We know that 50 percent of dogs with allergic skin disease and 80 percent of dogs with food hypersensitivity will show signs of ear inflammation," explains Dr. Byers. "This inflammation is most commonly due to excess cerumen or wax production, not necessarily an infection. However, secondary infections caused by yeast and/or bacteria are also common."

When you take your dog to your veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment, this process requires the following:

- 1) Provide thorough history of your dog's problems.
- 2) Allow the veterinarian to perform a complete physical examination including an aural examination with an otoscope on the ears. This device allows the veterinarian to take a good look at the inside of the ear canal. An infected ear will generally have a deep red, inflamed appearance.
- 3) The veterinarian will take swab samples from the dog's ear to look under the microscope and to culture for bacterial growth.

Only by knowing the underlying cause of the inflammation AND any perpetuating factors, such as secondary infections with bacteria and/or yeast, anatomic changes to the ear, and middle ear disease, will the problem be treated appropriately.

Treatment could include the following:

- 1) Thoroughly clean and dry the ear canal
- 2) Removing (or at least manage) the primary disease process
- 3) Control the perpetuating factors
- 4) Administer the most appropriate topical and/or systemic medications
- 5) Assess response to prescribed therapies

Prescribed medications characteristically fall into three different categories:

- 1) Ear cleaners
- 2) Topical medications

3) Systemic (affecting the whole body) medications

However, not all dogs with ear inflammation, with or without infection, will require medication from each of these categories.

Normally, it will take one to two weeks for a dog to recover from an ear inflammation with the use of topical medications.

"Recovery time will certainly be less if the veterinarian sees the dog earlier so that the inflammation doesn't get a good foothold," say Dr. Hammer. "However, there is no exact way to gauge the length of treatment."

"Talk to your veterinarian and ask them what they would recommend as far as preventive medicine for ear problems," suggests Dr. Hammer. "What I would use on a Labrador, I won't use on a Springer Spaniel."

"When a dog is so uncomfortable, or their ears are so red, that is almost an emergency, and the dog needed to have been seen long before it became an emergency," says Dr. Hammer.

However, seek immediate medical attention if your dog seems dizzy, has trouble walking, is lethargic, vomiting, not eating, is bleeding from the ear, or shows evidence of uncontrolled pain.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Along with a couple of doggy treats makes everything better.