

Scratchy Smelly Ears

by: David Finlay, DVM

Does your dog or cat constantly shake their head or scratch their ears? They could have a condition called otitis externa. Otitis externa is inflammation and/or infection of the outer ear canal. Many factors can predispose your pet to, or cause this condition. Pets with long floppy ears (like cocker spaniels) or very narrow canals (like shar-peis) are more prone to ear problems. Some of the most common causes are: allergic skin disease (especially in dogs), ear mites (especially in cats), hair growth in the ear canal and foreign material in the ear like dried wax, grass awns etc. It is very important that your veterinarian determine the underlying cause of your pet's ear condition as it may become a chronic issue.

Ear infections with certain types of bacteria and yeast commonly perpetuate and complicate otitis externa. It is often very important to recognize the infection and identify the organism so treatment may be initiated. This can usually be done by simply obtaining a sample of the waxy material from your pet's ear. If the pet has chronic ear infections that don't respond well to certain types of treatment, the sample may need to be cultured and tested to see which medications will specifically eradicate the infection.

Treatment of otitis externa involves routine cleansing of the ears, as well as topical medications. These topicals come in the form of drops or ointments that are usually given once or twice daily. Depending on the type of infection and cause of the ear disease, certain animals need additional oral medications and/or injections. If otitis externa becomes chronic, it may lead to disease in the middle ear called otitis media. This condition may require more extensive diagnosis and treatment, including sedation to examine the middle ear and maybe even surgery.

Appropriate ear cleaning is the best preventative tool owners have to avoid chronic otitis externa. This will help most animals avoid more serious ear issues. It is important to use a good quality ear cleanser routinely using the proper technique. Do not use human ear cleaners as they are not formulated for dogs and cats. Also, make sure the cleaner is at room temperature before use. While most pets will resist at first, better acceptance is usually seen with time.

If you think your pet has otitis externa or want to be shown how to properly clean your pet's ears, contact us.