

Ear ye, ear ye, otitis is common in dogs, and allergies are often to blame

September 19 2014, by Dr. Jennifer Schissler Pendergraft

Ear inflammation, or otitis, is one of the most common medical problems that dogs experience; because there are many causes, it is important to seek veterinary care to prevent severe pain and damage to deeper structures of the ear, which may lead to dizziness and long-term hearing loss.

Inflammation may occur in the outer ear, [middle ear](#) or inner ear, known by the medical terms otitis externa, otitis media and otitis interna.

The [outer ear](#) comprises the [ear canal](#), which ends at the ear drum. A dog's ear canal has an "L" shape and can be quite sensitive. For this reason, a professional evaluation with an otoscope is required to safely examine the entire ear canal and ear drum. The structures of the middle and inner ear are behind the ear drum and contain nerves for hearing, balance, and appropriate facial movement.

Allergies are the most common cause of ear inflammation and infection in [dogs](#). These patients may show skin problems, but some dogs manifest allergy as otitis alone.

Other causes of otitis are parasites, plant material, trauma, tumors and hormone problems.

What symptoms will a dog with otitis show?

- Persistent or aggressive rubbing and scratching at the ears
- Changes in ear position
- Shaking of the head, head tilt or head-shy behavior
- Redness, discharge, swelling or malodor
- Dogs with allergies may also lick, bite, chew or rub the skin.

The diagnostic and treatment plan recommended by your veterinarian typically involves examination of the ear canals with a scope and sampling of ear exudate. The exudate is examined microscopically for bacteria and yeast.

For severe, long-standing cases, X-rays or CT scan may be recommended, as well as deep-ear cleaning under anesthesia to assess and treat the deeper structures of the ear.

Treatment for infection and inflammation often involves application of medications in the ear. Cleaning may also be recommended.

For dogs with no history of otitis, routine ear cleaning is not required.

When administering ear medication, remember:

- Apply only medications or treatments recommended by your veterinarian.
- Do not place cotton-tipped applicators or any other instruments in your dog's ears. These can irritate the ear canal, push material closer to the ear drum, and can even cause painful rupture of the [ear drum](#).

Tips for successfully administering ear cleansers and medicated drops:

- Two people may make the job easier, with one to hold the dog and the other to apply medication.
- Many dogs tolerate ear medication well. Help them by offering a treat, praise, or a positive activity afterwards.
- Consider application outdoors or in a non-carpeted area as the job might be messy.
- When cleaning the ears, place applicator nozzle just inside the ear opening. Gently fill the ear canal with the cleansing liquid. Gently massage the base of the ears. Allow dog to shake out contents. Use a soft cloth to wipe the ear flap. Use a cotton ball moistened with alcohol to cleanse the tip of the applicator after use.
- With ear drops, locate the ear canal opening and provide the volume recommended by your veterinarian; gently massage the base of the ear. If you find it hard to count drops, err on the side of more medication.
- It is normal for dogs to shake their heads or scratch their [ears](#) right after application.
- Medicate for the full recommended time, as your dog's ear is likely to look and feel better before the infection is entirely resolved.

Always contact your veterinarian if the problem worsens, or if your dog is too painful, fearful or aggressive to safely apply medication. Follow up with your veterinarian to ensure that your dog is responding appropriately.

While otitis is a common problem, you can safely help your dog with veterinary exams and careful treatment.

Provided by Colorado State University

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