

Ear Problems

The most common ear problem in dogs is inflammation of the outer ear, technically termed otitis externa. The area between the outside opening and the eardrum can be irritated by infections, parasites, allergies and foreign objects.

Signs of Ear Problems Signs of irritation include scratching, shaking the head, and reacting painfully when the ears are touched. You may also see discharge. Ear hematomas are common if irritation goes untreated. Depending on the cause, one or both of the ears may be affected.

How Ear Problems are Diagnosed Your veterinarian will use an otoscope to look into the ears. He will also take a sample of ear discharge and examine it microscopically to check for signs of infection or ear mites. If infection is present, the sample may be sent to a lab for culture. Cultures provide information about the kinds of bacteria present and the medications that can help. During the examination, the veterinarian may also see foreign objects such as foxtails in the ear canal. If your dog's ears are very painful, sedation or anesthesia may be required.

Common Causes of Ear Problems Some pets are prone to ear problems due to anatomy, allergies, or skin conditions. Ventilation of the ears is poor in dogs with floppy ears, resulting in a warm, moist environment perfect for growth of bacteria and yeast. Certain breeds of dogs are also more likely to suffer from skin allergies and disorders like seborrhea. These skin problems affect the ears too, causing chronic inflammation and susceptibility to infection.

The lining of the ear canal, like the rest of the skin, normally contains small amounts of bacteria and yeast. These organisms are harmless unless they multiply out of control. Overgrowth causes irritation, inflammation, foul odor and discharge. Chronic infection can lead to damage to ear tissues, including rupture of the ear drum. If the ear drum is ruptured, the infection can gain access to the middle and inner ear, causing serious problems like head tilt, loss of balance, and inability to walk normally.

Parasites in the ear include ear mites and ticks. Ear mites are tiny creatures that are just barely visible with the naked eye. They are quite contagious between animals. They cause severe itching and produce large amounts of black, waxy discharge. Pets with ear mites scratch their ears incessantly. This can lead to ear or skin infections as well as damage to deeper ear structures. Ticks can attach to the inside of the ears. They may irritate the ears or obstruct the canal, preventing normal ventilation and interfering with hearing.

The most common foreign bodies in the ears are foxtails or grass awns. These pointy seeds get caught in pet's fur and gradually work their way into the skin, nose, ears, and paws where they can cause major damage. Foxtails in the ears are very irritating. If they are not removed, they can penetrate the ear drum.

Treatment for Ear Problems The first step in treating ear problems is a thorough cleaning of the ears. This may require sedation or anesthesia. Once the ears are clean, specific medications are prescribed. Antibiotics are used for bacterial infections, antifungals for yeast, anti-inflammatories for irritation and allergies, and insecticides for ear mites. Most of the medications are administered directly into your dog's ears proper administration is crucial for effective treatment. Medication must be given exactly as instructed and continued for the full duration prescribed, even if the pet seems to be fully recovered sooner.

The final step is to minimize the factors that can put pets at higher risk for ear problems. Skin problems and allergies may respond to dietary supplements, antihistamines, or anti-inflammatories. Routine ear cleaning with a product recommended by your veterinarian can also help. Even though it may look silly, you can help keep your floppy-eared dogs ears healthy and dry by using a hair clip to pin them on top of his head for an hour or so each day. Avoid allowing pets in areas that contain foxtails and check for foxtails when they return from outdoors. If signs of ear problems recur, seek prompt medical attention before the condition worsens.