

Anal Glands



Many domestic dogs experience irritation and discomfort with their anal sacs. This condition, though relatively simple, can lead the pet and even the pet owner, through misery. In this handout, we will try to explore exactly what anal glands are and how they cause problems for our dogs. We will also look at the symptoms of full anal glands and also how your veterinarian can help with solutions to this annoying problem.

Let's begin with the anatomy of an anal gland. Dogs have anal glands positioned on either side of the anus, just below the surface. These glands, sometimes called anal sacs, produce a thick brown liquid, with a very foul odor. When functioning normally, these sacs will express their contents onto the feces with each bowel movement. This secretion on the feces is believed to serve as a means of marking territory. Dogs will commonly use urine and feces to scent mark. A dog will often sniff another dog's feces, probably with the purpose of identifying who has been in their yard or in their territory.

This unique system for marking territory does not always function properly. Occasionally, the small ducts which drain the anal sacs become clogged with this thick secretion. When this occurs, the anal gland becomes enlarged and uncomfortable. Dogs will attempt to relieve this discomfort by scooting their rear quarters across the ground or by biting and chewing at that area. Scooting has often been misinterpreted to mean a dog has worms. Though this may be true in some cases, more often than not, it is associated with full anal glands. When you notice these symptoms occurring, especially if they have persisted for several days, it is important to seek medical assistance for your pet.

Your veterinarian or the trained veterinary staff will be able to assist your pet in releasing the accumulated pressure in these glands. This is most often performed through a quick procedure of gently squeezing the gland while performing an internal rectal exam. Expressing these glands will release the smelly contents of the anal sacs. Though efforts are made to clean and refresh the area, you may elect to bathe your pet after this procedure. Your groomer may also be trained to perform an anal gland expression and may do this routinely during your pet's grooming.

Your veterinarian will assess your dog's condition to determine if other treatment is necessary. Occasionally, anal glands become infected and will need much more aggressive treatment. This can be as severe as a draining abscess through the surrounding skin. After a thorough evaluation, your veterinarian will determine the best treatment for your dog, which sometimes includes a surgical procedure to clear up any infections.

In closing, you may be wondering if there is a way to avoid your pet's problem with anal glands. Though no one understands why some dogs are more effected than others, early attention to symptoms will certainly eliminate some of the more serious complications, such as infection. Those pets that suffer from chronic problems with their anal glands may benefit from an elective surgery that removes both anal glands. This delicate operation is not for every dog, but your veterinarian can help you decide if your dog may be a good candidate for this procedure. As you understand this problem a little more clearly, hopefully you will be able to utilize this information for your dog's health and happiness.