

EAR DISEASE -The Importance of Good Hygiene

Ear disease in dogs and cats is a frequent concern of pet owners. Approximately 20% of all animals brought to veterinary hospitals have otitis externa.

What is Otitis Externa?

Otitis Externa is one of the most common diseases found in household pets - Otitis externa is the inflammation of the external ear canal and can cause great discomfort to the animal. The condition may present itself with a variety of different symptoms, including shaking of the head (*the most common*), scratching of the ears and malodor of the ear canal. As the condition worsens, symptoms may elevate to red, swollen and exudative ears.

What Causes Otitis Externa?

A host of primary diseases are complicated with secondary otitis externa. The most common are:

- **Atopy** -an allergy to something in the environment characterised by scratching, paw licking and face rubbing.
- **Food allergy** - an allergy due to hypersensitivity reactions to certain food or food additives
- **Seborrhea** -excessive and abnormal production of oil in the skin and ear canal, and the formation of greasy or dry, scaly skin
- **Ear mites** - parasites that commonly cause the onset of otitis externa in puppies and kittens. Once the disease is initiated, ear mites will leave the ear canal or be destroyed by inflammation or secondary infection.,
- **Foreign bodies** - Such as dirt, grass awns, loose hairs, etc., are frequently responsible for otitis externa, especially in certain areas of the country

Why is Otitis Externa so Common?

Dogs are more likely than cats to suffer from Otitis Externa

The canine ear has some distinct characteristics that lead to the increased probability of acquiring otitis externa.

- The canine ear canal is deep and covered. This allows debris, wax and excess moisture to collect.
- Certain canine breeds have ears that flap down, covering the opening to the vertical canal. Proper ventilation of the ear canal is restricted, thus inviting bacteria and fungus to grow. This characteristic coupled with concurrent allergies accounts for the majority of otitis externa cases in dogs.

Inside the Ear

The two major functions of the ear are the reception of auditory signals and the maintenance of balance. These functions can be impaired by lesions or infections anywhere within the ear. Therefore, it is important to maintain the ears of your pet.

Canine and feline ears are similar to humans in that they are divided into three sections: the external ear, the middle ear and the inner ear.

The pinna funnels sound waves into the vertical and horizontal canals of the external ear. The canals lead to tympanic membrane (*ear drum*) which separates the external ear from the middle ear. The middle ear transforms these sound waves into fluid vibrations, triggering nervous impulses in the cochlea of the inner ear. Any disruption of this process can affect your pet's hearing/or balance.

The lining of the external ear canal is made up of multi-layered, scaly skin containing sebaceous (*oil*) glands, apocrine (*sweat*) glands and hair follicles. Normal earwax is a mixture of secretions from these glands. When inflammation occurs, these glands are impacted and their secretions increase greatly, possibly blocking the auditory passageway.

Prevention and Treatment

If your pet develops any evidence of otitis externa, an otoscopic examination by your veterinarian is recommended. To aid in the prevention of this ear disease, good general hygiene practices should be followed. These include cleaning your pet's ears on a routine basis. **Regular cleanings will result in:**

- Removing foreign bodies
- Removing wax or purulent exudate
- Removing bacterial toxins and cellular debris
- The promotion of a healthy ear.