

Ear infections in dogs



What are ear infections?

Otitis externa is inflammation or infection of the outer ear canal.

The inflammation can cause the ear skin to open, allowing bacteria and yeasts to grow and cause what is called a secondary infection.

What causes ear infections?

There are many potential causes, including:

- Allergic skin disease is the most common cause, a broad term used to describe many allergic conditions that cause skin inflammation such as food and pollen hypersensitivity.
- Foreign bodies, such as grass seeds.
- Ear shape.
- Parasites such as ear mites, although this is rare in dogs over the age of six months.
- Hormone disorders such as hypothyroidism and Cushing's disease.
- Tumours or polyps.

Some dogs are at greater risk of otitis, such as:

- Dogs with particular ear shapes or narrow ear canals (e.g. Shar Peis), dogs with floppy ears (e.g. basset hounds) or those with hairy ears.
- Dogs that enjoy swimming outdoors.

Dogs with otitis can be at greater risk of repeated ear infections. If left untreated, the ear canals can become thicker and narrower, and it can become difficult to treat, with corrective surgery sometimes utilised as a last resort.

What are the signs of infection?

Not all dogs will show the same signs, but look out for:

- Scratching at the ears.
- Smelly ears.
- Head shaking, flapping or tilting.
- Redness or thickening in the ears.
- Excessive wax or discharge from the ears.

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How is it diagnosed?

After discussing your pet's history, your vet may suggest:

- A physical exam, i.e. looking down the ears with an otoscope, checking the eardrum is intact prior to treatment, and assessing the skin.
- Cytology, where your vet takes a smear of material from the ear canal and looks under a microscope.
- Culture, where your vet takes a swab to send to a lab to check which organisms are growing.

How is it treated?

Topical or in-ear treatments

If a bacterial, yeast or parasitic infection is present, antibiotic, antifungal or anti-parasitic medications are applied directly into the ear (antibiotics given by mouth often cannot reach the ear canal), either by:

- Daily or twice-daily drops, often alongside ear cleaning.
- A one-off treatment gel applied by your vet which acts for four weeks.
- If a foreign body is present, your vet will need to remove it, often under sedation.

Oral or tablet treatments

Often, severely affected ears are narrow and painful. If this is the case, your vet may prescribe steroid tablets to reduce the swelling and open the canals. Drops may then be used, sometimes on a long-term basis to reduce the incidence of flare ups.

Ear flushing

Some ears contain too much debris to treat, or need antibiotics that only work in a clean canal. In this case, your vet may suggest giving your dog a deep ear cleaning under anaesthetic.

Surgery

Severely affected ears (usually those which have had repeated or long-term unresolved infections) may reach a point where the above treatments will no longer work. These patients may require surgery to solve the problem and relieve the pain.

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Key points to consider when treating ear infections

- Any underlying causes must be treated to reduce the chances of the infection coming back. This usually means treating an underlying allergy, even once the ear infection is resolved.
- The infection must be completely resolved to prevent it from recurring, which may mean that treatment is still needed after your dog's symptoms have cleared up. Repeated cytology may also need to be performed.
- Please attend your follow-up appointment after a course of ear treatment!

Repeatedly using antibiotics in ears encourages resistant bacteria to grow, which can result in infections that don't respond to any antibiotics. Your vet will try to avoid this by:

- Only using antibiotics once an infection has been diagnosed.
- Using cytology to predict which antibiotics will work, and check they have worked.
- Using culture to select an antibiotic when there is suspicion of aggressive bacteria.
- Working with you to treat the underlying trigger e.g. skin allergies.

What are the potential complications of otitis externa?

Occasionally, infections can rupture the eardrum and cause infection of the middle ear, which requires different treatment. Uncontrolled or repeated infections can also lead to chronic pain and deafness.

How can the risk of repeated infections be reduced?

Some dogs will always be at increased risk of ear infections, but if your vet identifies your dog as at risk, we might suggest:

- Regular ear cleaning.
- Diet modification or allergy medications if your dog has an underlying allergy.
- Steroid ear drops for dogs with persistently inflamed ears caused by allergies.

Careful monitoring is key, and you should always contact your vet as soon as you spot symptoms and attend any follow-up appointments!

Please get in touch if you have any questions or think your dog might have an ear infection.