

Ask A Vet: Finding the Cause Could Cure Your Dog's Ear Infections

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Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog has been getting ear infections chronically for the last couple years. I get an ointment from my vet that seems to clear it up, but it seems to keep coming back at the same times each year. How can I prevent this from happening?

Dear Reader,

Canine Ear infections otherwise known as "Otitis Externa" are one of the most common issues veterinarians face. In fact, it is estimated that around 20% of dogs deal with ear infections regularly. They are often stubborn to get rid of, and recur with great frequency. They can also be very painful for the dog and incredibly annoying to the sympathetic owner.

My guess is that your dog has a primary cause for his infections such as allergies to something in the environment. The actual infection is usually just secondary to this primary problem.

Successfully dealing with and preventing otitis externa in your dog depends on obtaining the correct diagnosis. The most common signs to notice at home are head shaking, scratching, redness, or a foul smelling discharge from the ear canal. If you notice these or other signs, it is important to see your veterinarian. He or she can then use a microscope to determine what type of infection it is so the appropriate treatment can be done right away.

The most common types of ear infections in dogs are fungal(yeast) and bacterial. Occasionally dogs can also develop ear mite infestations but contrary to popular belief this only makes up about 10% of cases. (Ear infections in cats are mites 90% of the time) Treating these infections is fairly simple in most cases with either a topical and/or oral antibiotic or antifungal. Anti-inflammatories are also used in many cases to combat pain and swelling.

The most challenging question is why did the infection develop in the first place? This is also the key to success when trying to prevent them from returning. Typically there is a predisposing or primary cause, especially when the infections are chronic. Allergies to either food or particles in the environment are the most common. Veterinarians often use allergy testing or hypoallergenic food trials to diagnose these allergies. Humidity in the air or moisture from bathing or swimming can also play a role in allowing infections to arise. Certain breeds such as Cocker Spaniels, Labradors, Springer Spaniels and Bulldogs may even have anatomical features such as excessive wax production or stenosis ear canals that can predispose them to ear infections.

If your dog suffers from ear infections it is imperative that you clean the ears properly on a regular basis. Consult your veterinarian about the best type of cleaner to use and the proper method for cleaning them. If cleaning alone does not control the problem have your dog seen as soon as possible. Canine ear infections are frustrating, but when a proper diagnosis and cause is found they can be controlled.

-Dr. Justin Sellon