

Ask A Vet: Lend an Ear to this Problem

Sunday, February 1, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog has been rubbing her ears on the ground and scratching them constantly. There is a lot of black stuff coming out of them and it smells really bad. Is this an ear infection, mites, or what?

Dear Pet Owner,

Ear infections are fairly common in all dog breeds, with exceptionally high rates in Cocker Spaniels, Bassetts, and Labs. The inciting cause can be allergies (both food or environmental), recent activities around water (swimming or bathing), or a potential anatomical difference: the ear canals are narrowed, the presence of hair within the ear canal, etc.

There are several types of organisms that can cause such an infection. Ear mites are small arachnids (related to spiders and ticks) which are passed from dog to dog by close head contact. Most commonly it is from a mother dog to her pups. While ear mites are a potential cause of infection in dogs, they are rare in adult and older dogs. One of the contributing factors to potential infections in dogs is that their ear canals are normally "L" shaped. This shape does not allow much air flow or for fluid/debris to be easily removed. The skin of the ear canal has a normal population of bacteria and yeast living in and on the lining. These organisms are part of the natural defense of the ear. However, if moisture collects in the lower part of the ear canal, the bacteria and yeast can overgrow and lead to an ear infection. When you see your veterinarian, they will likely use a swab to take a sample of ear wax from your dog, put it on a slide and look for mites, bacteria, or yeast.

Treatment of ear infections is accomplished by cleaning the ears regularly and applying topical medication to destroy the bacteria/yeast/mites within the ear. Be careful with what you use to clean the ears; the internet has many suggestions which commonly cause the problem to get worse. Never put tap, distilled, or soda water into your dog's ears. Vinegar (an acid) or hydrogen peroxide will burn the inside of the ears and make them even more irritated. Most veterinarians will recommend a commercial ear cleaner which is safe and effective for your dog. In my opinion, regular ear cleaning is the best way to treat and prevent ear infections, particularly in the dogs that have chronic problems. The medications target the organisms and treat the pain within the ears. While it is easier to give pills versus putting drops or ointment into your dog's ears, it will not be effective to do so. Follow your veterinarian's treatment plan, and any follow-up recommendations.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman