

## DOG EAR PROBLEMS - A VETERINARIANS' VIEW

Ear problems are among the most common reasons dogs need to see the vet.

**While ear infections are often considered “routine”, they are painful for dogs and extremely frustrating for their owners!**

It is important to identify the underlying cause of recurrent ear issues. Otherwise, ear disease can become increasingly difficult to manage. I highly recommend scheduling a veterinary exam when you notice any symptoms of ear disease.

**The vast majority of ear problems are due to otitis externa, which is infection in the outer ear canal.**

Your vet will confirm this diagnosis based on an otoscope exam and cytology. Cytology is an essential step to determine what type of infection is present. A swab is taken of the ear and examined under the microscope for yeast, bacteria, mites, or inflammatory cells. This is done in just a few minutes, and based on the results, your vet will recommend a topical ear drop or ointment.

Most medications contain a combination of antibiotic, antifungal, and steroid ingredients that are applied directly into the ear canal once or twice daily for 1-2 weeks. Some products can be instilled into the ear at the veterinary clinic and stay in place for a couple weeks, which is a great option for dogs that are painful or not tolerant of their ears being handled at home.

Oral antibiotics are not very effective at treating outer ear infections. They are typically used for middle or inner ear infections, which are much less common. This is an important difference between pets and children, who usually develop middle ear infections and require oral antibiotics.

**Not all ear medications are created equal and they are not interchangeable.** Your vet will select the best product based on your dog's exam, history, and cytology results. If an infection is recurrent and severe, they

may even recommend a culture and sensitivity test, which will reveal the exact bacteria present and what antibiotic will be the most effective.

**In addition to topical medications, ear cleansers are usually recommended to clear the debris from the ear and break up the bacterial biofilm before instituting treatment.** Cleansers are also useful after an infection has resolved to maintain a healthy ear canal. Just like ear medications, not all cleansers are the same. Your vet will recommend a specific cleanser based on the type of infection present.

If your dog's ears are very inflamed and painful, your vet may prescribe a steroid or other anti-inflammatory medication for a few days. This alleviates discomfort faster than topical ear drops and can help you apply daily medications and cleansers with less difficulty.

**After completing the treatment course for otitis, it is imperative that you schedule a recheck exam with your vet, even if you feel the ears have improved.** If an infection isn't completely cleared it will come back quickly and could become resistant to routine antibiotics, making it increasingly difficult to resolve.

The longer an infection is present, it can alter the environment of the ear canal. The canal may become scarred and thickened, making it very uncomfortable and inefficient at clearing infection and discharge. These ear canals are very narrow so medication can't penetrate down the entire canal. It becomes a vicious cycle in which each infection is worse than the one before it.

For this reason, I also strongly discourage reusing previous ear medications without a veterinary exam and cytology. Ear infections may appear similar based on the outward appearance and symptoms, but can be comprised of entirely different bacterial or yeast organisms. Inappropriate treatments will predispose your dog to increasingly severe ear problems.

**Most ear infections, with the exception of mites, are not contagious between dogs.**

They are usually opportunistic infections due to underlying allergies or other medical conditions. Dogs can have environmental allergies, food allergies, or

both. If your dog suffers from frequent ear problems, I highly recommend strict prescription diet trials and other allergy tests to get to the root of the problem.

Bloodwork is important to look for underlying thyroid or adrenal gland disease, which can predispose to otitis as well.

**While special tests and prescription diets seem expensive at first, it will save money in the long run by preventing chronic ear infections.**

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