

Ear Infections

Here at PetPartners, Inc., the exclusive pet healthcare provider for the [AKC Pet Healthcare Plan](#), we've recently seen a growing number of claims for otitis external. We asked Ms. DeWana Anderson, DVM at The Animal Hospital of Carrboro, Inc. to address the causes, symptoms and treatment of this condition for the benefit of our *Barking Bulletin* readers.

Q. What are the clinical signs of otitis external?

A. Dogs may have one or more of the following clinical signs:

- Pain
- Shaking of the head
- Scratching of the ears
- Abnormal odor from the ears
- Redness and swelling of the inside of the ears

Q. What causes otitis external? Can there be complicating factors?

A. Otitis external is often the result of a bacterial, yeast or mite infection. Sometimes there are underlying diseases and causes and, when not treated, this can delay or prevent healing. Causes and diseases of otitis external can include:

- **Allergies:** Allergies to the environment or food may predispose pets to recurrent or chronic ear infections. A hypoallergenic diet trial or skin testing for environmental allergens can help identify causative allergens.
- **Hormonal disease:** Hormonal diseases may suppress the immune system and can increase the chance of developing an ear infection. Blood testing or other screening is often necessary to identify these underlying diseases.
- **Middle ear infection:** A condition called otitis media can occur when otitis external becomes chronic and penetrates through the eardrum into the middle ear. Detailed examination of the ears with the pet under sedation can help diagnose otitis media. Computed tomography (CT) or radiography is sometimes necessary to establish a diagnosis.
- **Abnormal ear conformation/ hair:** Pets with narrow ear canals, long ear flaps, or hair growing in the canals may have moisture and wax build-up. This increases their chances of developing an ear infection and is often diagnosed with a thorough physical examination.
- **Tumors/polyps:** Masses in the ear canal, such as tumors or polyps, can obstruct the canal. This can prevent medication from penetrating the canal easily. Masses are typically identified during a physical examination by your veterinarian or through an ear radiograph or CT scan. Surgery may be needed to remove these masses.
- **Foreign objects in the ear:** Dried clumps of wax, grass, or other objects may irritate the ear canal and act as a focus of infection. These objects are often identified during a physical examination and can sometimes be removed without sedation.

Q. How is otitis external diagnosed?

A. Your veterinarian will first perform an external examination of the ear and canal. Some pets experience too much pain to allow an otoscope (a special instrument to view deeper regions of your pet's ear) to examine the ear canal and tympanic membrane. Sedation is often necessary to manage the discomfort that can be associated with an inflamed ear canal.

Your veterinarian may also look at the appearance of substance build-up in the canal. Yeast infections commonly produce a yellow-tan, thick substance and bacterial infections commonly produce a brownish-black, thin substance. Unfortunately appearance does not always result in an accurate diagnosis -- **a microscopic examination of substances is the single most important tool in diagnosing otitis external.** Repeat microscopic examination is necessary in chronic cases to monitor treatment success over time.

Chronic cases or those that do not respond to initial therapy may require further testing. These tests may include culture of the substance, skin biopsy, food trials, allergy tests, blood screening or imaging studies (e.g., skull radiograph or a CT scan). Chronic or complicated otitis cases are often referred to a veterinary dermatologist for further diagnostic testing.

Q. How is external ear disease treated?

A. Therapy is based on the character of the disease (bacteria, yeast or mites) and suspicion of the underlying disease. Uncomplicated cases are usually treated with antibiotic, anti-fungal, anti-inflammatory or anti-parasitic medications that are applied directly to the ear canal. Many cases require a combination of medications. Long term (four to six weeks) therapy may be necessary if severe otitis external or media is present.

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Your veterinarian will likely suggest an ear cleaner or drying agent and recommend a cleaning schedule to help prevent substance build up and disease recurrence.

Canine ear infections can be frustrating for owners and painful for their pets. If you suspect that your dog might have an ear infection it's important to contact your veterinarian right away. In most cases the correct diagnosis and treatment of ear infections means they can be resolved quickly -- by working closely with your veterinarian and following their recommendations.

For more information on Dr. DeWana Anderson, visit: <http://www.theanima lhospital.biz/Services/ index.php>