



Ear Infections

As we head into the warmer months of the year we expect to see an increase in the number of dogs presenting to us with ear infections (or otitis externa to use the technical term). Ear infections account for about 15% of visits to our hospital in spring and summer. The reported prevalence of ear infections in dogs ranges from 10 to 20%. That is to say up to 1 in 5 dogs will experience an ear infection.

Unfortunately there are a number of misconceptions relating to management and prevention of ear infections. Incorrect management may result in an increased incidence of infections or worsening of infection in affected dogs.

So why do dogs get ear infections? There are a number of factors that contribute to ear infections in dogs. Correct identification and management of these factors is essential to the successful management of ear infections. Every patient is different, so there is no “one size fits all” strategy for treating infections. In some patients, infections can be extremely difficult to treat and eradicate. In some of these frustrating cases surgical procedures may be required as part of the management.

When dealing with ear infections, the first thing we vet’s do is try and identify what we call primary factors that may be causing the infection. Primary factors would include foreign bodies in the ear canal, skin allergies (due to airborne allergens or food allergy), ear mites and certain hormonal diseases.

Ear mites and foreign bodies can usually be identified and managed at the initial visit to the veterinarian.

Identifying allergies is a more time consuming process and would involve dietary trials and allergy testing.

After we have considered possible primary factors in ear infection, we would then consider what we call perpetuating factors. Most of the dogs that present to us with ear infections have perpetuating factors that we can identify. The most common one is conformational factors, such as narrowed ear canals (due to previous infections and scarring), hairy ear canals, and the big one – pendulous ears.

Breeds with pendulous ears include Cocker Spaniels (the top breed when it comes to ear infections), Golden Retrievers and Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. In these breeds, the ear flap hangs over the ear canal, resulting in a humid poorly ventilated ear canal, a perfect environment for bacteria and yeasts to thrive in.

Excess moisture in the ear canal is another predisposing factor. We see this in dogs that swim regularly or get water in the ears at bath time. The other cause of ear canal moisture is the weather conditions. The humid summers we get in Sydney contribute to increased incidence of ear infections, especially with yeasts. We all know how much yeasts like moist, dark environments.

Once we have a handle on which factors may be playing a part in the infection, we can move on to appropriate treatment. When I see an infected ear, after addressing the above-mentioned factors the first two things I want to do are clean the ear effectively

and take some samples from the ear to identify which infectious agents are involved.

Taking samples from the ear for microscopic examination is quick, inexpensive and an important part of treating ear infections. This allows us to determine if the infection is due to yeasts, mites, bacteria, or a combination of these. Depending on what we find, it may be necessary to take another ear swab to be sent to a laboratory for culture of the organism and identification of which antibiotics would be appropriate for treatment.

The 3 important aspects of treatment are cleaning, medications effective against the bacteria or yeast, and controlling inflammation.

Initial cleaning of the ear canal can be difficult in the conscious dog, as the ear will usually be quite painful. In some patients we will need to sedate or anaesthetise to perform cleaning. Initial cleaning will involve the use of medicated wipes and or ear flushing. In most cases I like to use medicated wipes that contain acetic acid and boric acid.

Your veterinarian can show you how to continue cleaning at home. Different vets will have their own preferences on what to use as a flushing solution. There are commercially available solutions that are suitable. Alternatively saline, or a 50% white vinegar 50% water solution can be used. Your vet can show you how to perform a thorough ear flush and clean.

It is essential that the ear canal be clean and dry before applying topical ear treatments. The presence of pus and debris in the canal will stop topical treatments from working. It is also very important to note that over-cleaning can also be damaging and be a perpetuating factor in ear infections. Whilst every case will be different (and your vet will steer you in the right direction), a typical cleaning protocol might be to clean twice a day for 3 to 5 days, then 2-3 times a week. Once the infection is controlled, cleaning may only be necessary once every 1 to 2 weeks.

One more thing about ear cleaning. **DO NOT STICK COTTON BUDS DOWN YOUR DOG'S EAR CANAL!** This may push debris further down the canal so it becomes impacted against the eardrum, potentially resulting in rupture of the eardrum.

Once the ear canal is nice and clean, 3-4 drops of the ear ointment your vet has given you should be put in the ear twice daily. Correct duration of treatment is important. The rule of thumb is to treat for at least 3 days past the point where the infection is cured. It is not uncommon to require 2 to 3 weeks of treatment. Stopping treatment too soon is a common cause of failure to resolve infections.

A final tip for owners of dogs with floppy ears that are prone to ear infections. If he or she will allow it, use a soft hair clip or scrunchy and peg the ears back to each other for an hour or so twice daily. This will improve ventilation and reduce humidity in the ear canal, resulting in a reduced susceptibility to recurrent ear infections.