



## Anal Sacs

Fans of the vet and author James Herriot would remember the hilarious tales of his client Mrs Pumphrey. Mrs Pumphrey was a very wealthy member of the English upper class. Her little Pekingese dog “Tricky Woo” was ridiculously spoilt and treated like royalty. He was also regularly afflicted by a mysterious ailment that she referred to as “flop bot”. “Oh Mr Herriot” she would plead over the telephone, “you must come at once it is an emergency. Tricky has gone flop bot again”. Mr Herriot very much enjoyed his trips to Mrs Pumphrey’s estate, because he was also treated like royalty, fed gourmet food and given fine wine to drink.

The mysterious condition that Mrs Pumphrey called flop bot, was actually a condition known in the veterinary game as “impacted anal sacs”. It has also been referred to as “blocked glands”. Pet owners whose dog’s have had this condition would understand why Mrs Pumphrey called it flop bot. Impacted anal sacs results in intense itchiness and irritation of the anal area. Affected dogs commonly flop their bottom on the ground and then pull themselves along the ground with their front legs. This is called scooting.

Anal sac impaction is one of the most common conditions veterinarians are called upon to treat. Despite this, relatively little is known about the problem and the anal sacs themselves. All carnivores (except bears) have them. Exactly what their function is remains undetermined. There is some evidence that they are used by animals in gender recognition. It is also thought that the scent is used in territory

marking. Skunks use their anal glands to spray the foul-smelling fluid as a defence against predators.

What we do know, is that the anal sacs are located underneath the skin on either side of the anus. There are glands in the wall of the sacs that produce the liquid that makes up part of the content of the sacs. Anyone who has been present when the sacs are emptied by their vet will attest to the extremely foul smell of this liquid.

As for why some dogs end up having problems with their anal sacs, this is also not known. Normally, the sacs empty when the dog defaecates. Some of the factors that may contribute to failure of anal sac emptying include obesity, poor muscle tone in the anal area (more common in small dogs), and soft stools or chronic diarrhoea.

So what can you do once you know your dog is cursed with anal sac problems? Well there are a number of options. Firstly, if they are not causing a problem leave them alone. Frequent emptying of the sacs in asymptomatic dogs can cause more problems with the anal sacs. Secondly, if your dog is overweight, start him or her on a weight loss program.

If your dog is scooting, ask your vet or dog groomer to empty them for you. If you are so inclined, they can also show you how to empty them. My experience is that once shown how, the vast majority of pet owners have absolutely no interest in doing the job themselves (not surprising as vets also hate the job)!

Increasing the amount of fibre in your dog's diet will result in larger bulkier stools. Theoretically this should aid in emptying of the anal sacs when your dog defaecates. If your dog's anal sacs are becoming impacted frequently this is worth trying. Psyllium husks (eg. Metamucil™) and unprocessed bran are ideal dietary additives for increasing stool bulk. Your veterinarian can advise you on the appropriate amounts to add for your dog. My experience is that in the dog with recurring anal sac impaction, increasing the dietary fibre is rarely helpful, but it is still worth trying.

Finally, for the dog that needs frequent emptying of its anal sacs, surgical removal of the sacs (anal saccullectomy) is warranted. My criterion for recommending surgery, is if the sacs need emptying more than once every 6 to 8 weeks. Manual emptying of the sacs this frequently can cause further irritation and inflammation. It is also not the most pleasant experience for the dog and the process of emptying the sacs manually does cause momentary discomfort.

It would seem that the anal sacs are an optional extra on dogs, as removing them does not cause any problems. On the contrary, dogs with chronic anal sac problems are usually much happier once they have been removed.

Like any surgery, there are potential complications that can arise from the procedure itself. The most potentially serious complication is faecal incontinence resulting from damage to the nerves that control the anus. The key to minimising the risk of this is to ensure that the procedure is performed by an experienced surgeon who is familiar with this procedure.