

Ear disease is very common in cats and dogs, either presenting to the clinic as a primary ear problem, or picked up at a routine appointment.

## Causes

Here are a few of the most common causes:

- **Ear mites** – usually seen in young animals, particularly cats. They are transmissible so may spread to other animals in the household. Cats will often show no signs of discomfort, however mites may cause intense irritation in dogs. Mites can be difficult to detect at veterinary examination unless present in high numbers.
- **Allergies** – can cause sudden onset of inflammation and irritation to the ear flap, the ear canal, or both. These can arise from parasitic, food or contact allergies (plastic feed bowls, woollen carpets etc). Dogs with atopic dermatitis will often suffer with ear disease too. In a similar way, irritation can arise from swimming, lying too close to a heat source, or if your pet becomes stressed for any reason.
- **Tumours or polyps** – will cause infection and irritation if growing in the ear canal.
- **Grass seeds** – usually cause very sudden clinical signs during or after a walk for example. Particularly common in Spaniels.
- **Infection (otitis externa)**, often occurs secondary to one of the above causes. Can be bacterial, fungal or a combination of the two.
- **Breed** – some breeds are more prone to developing ear disease than others, eg: dogs with heavy, hairy ears (Poodles, Spaniels), dogs with congenital narrowing of the ear canals (West Highland White Terriers, Cairn Terriers), or congenital deformities seen in some breeds (Basset Hounds, Labrador Retrievers).

## Clinical Signs

Symptoms will most commonly involve scratching, rubbing or shaking the head. A discharge may or may not be present, and can vary from black and waxy, to pus with a foul smell. You may notice that the ear flap and entrance to the ear canal is reddened and/or swollen.

Aural haematomas may develop if there is excessive head shaking. This can cause broken blood vessels within the ear flap, and cause a fluid swelling. This can usually be drained away, but if the primary ear disease is not treated, it is likely to recur and in some instances surgery is required to prevent haematomas refilling.

Ear disease can often be very painful, so treatment needs to be sought as early as possible.

## Diagnosis

After discussing the history and clinical signs, your vet will need to look down your pet's ear with an auroscope to allow visualisation of both the vertical and horizontal ear canals, and the ear drum. This can usually be done conscious with gentle restraint of the animal, although in some cases the ear may be too painful for this to be possible, and is best done under sedation or general anaesthetic. A sample of material from the ear canal may be taken to examine under the microscope to look for infectious agents and parasites. Swabs may be taken for bacterial culture.

Occasionally radiographs, biopsies or other diagnostic techniques, eg: scans, may be necessary if inner ear disease (beyond the ear drum), or neoplastic diseases are suspected.

## Treatment

If the ear canal is obstructed (eg: with a polyp, grass seed, or foreign body) this will usually need to be removed under sedation or general anaesthetic.

Your vet may prescribe ear drops for your pet. These usually contain anti-inflammatory, antibiotic and anti-fungal medication. Some ear drops are also effective against ear mites. They often work best if the ears have also been pre-treated with an ear cleaner to remove any wax and debris, thus allowing the medication to get deep into the ear canal. Get your vet or nurse to show you how to use the drops if you are unsure.

Sometimes in severe cases, your vet may need to prescribe oral treatment instead of, or in addition to ear drops. This may be because the ear drum has been perforated, or the ear is too painful or swollen to use topical ear drops. In other situations the ear canal may need to be packed with a special 'wick' soaked in antibiotic or anti-inflammatory. This will usually require a general anaesthetic both to insert and remove the wick.

In animals with deformities or chronic problems, surgery is often necessary (see EVG leaflet on ear surgery).

## Follow-up

Ensure you get your pet rechecked as directed by your vet, even if your pet seems to be better. It is important to examine the ears again to ensure that the problem has resolved. It may be necessary at this stage to take further samples for testing if therapy has not been effective, as an alternative medication may be needed. It can take several weeks to fully clear ear conditions and in some cases ongoing attention for the remainder of the pet's life.

## Prevention

Ideally use Advocate (from Bayer) once a month as part of your pet's parasite control regime. As well as treating fleas, lungworm and roundworms, Advocate is also effective against ear mites.

Regular ear cleaning will help to prevent a build up of wax and debris. This is especially important if your pet gets recurrent ear disease, or if they are a susceptible breed. Some animals will need their ears cleaned more often than others – ask your vet or nurse how frequently your pet's ears need cleaning, and what is the best product to use.

Check your pet's ears regularly for signs of problems. This will help make them easier to examine in a veterinary consult, and disease can be picked up and treated earlier.



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## Quick Reference Guide

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