



Ear Infections



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EAR INFECTIONS: Ear infections unfortunately are common in dogs and to a lesser extent cats. Understanding and knowledge of the relevant considerations associated with ear infection is important.

SYMPTOMS: Common symptoms of an ear infection can include: head shaking, scratching at one or both ears, rubbing the side of the face on the ground frequently, excessive discharge/material within the ears, visible inflammation (redness), noticeable odor, or pain response to touch and manipulation of the affected ear.

CAUSES: There can be many causes however in the majority of occurrences ear infections are due to an underlying allergy. The three main causes of allergic dermatitis in dogs are 1) Environmental allergy 2) flea allergy and 3) food allergy. Other causes may include factors such as: Anatomy (Cocker Spaniels, Basset Hounds, etc.), parasites (ear mites), foreign bodies within the ear canals, excessive hair in the ear canals, stenosis (narrowing) of the ear canals, glandular/skin conditions within the ears, and endocrine disorders (hypothyroidism).

DIAGNOSIS: Diagnosis of an ear infection involves an assessment of both the local factors (ear cytology) and effects within an affected ear (visualization of the affected ear(s)) as well as for an assessment of primary, secondary, and perpetuating causes. The age of onset of symptoms, seasonality of symptoms, history of symptoms, perpetuating and/or other primary factors, response to prior treatments, and external parasiticide use (flea/tick) prevention are commonly assessed to help formulate a diagnosis and thereby determine both short and long term treatment strategies. Empiric treatment with an effective flea/tick (external parasiticide) medication is an effective diagnostic tool.

TREATMENT: Treatment typically involves an initial cleaning and flushing of the affected ear(s) followed by a topical medication. Depending on other factors involved, additional oral or systemic treatments may be utilized to help treat and manage the condition. The initial cleaning and flushing of the affected ear is an important component of the treatment process as doing so 1) helps topical treatments work more effectively and 2) inhibits the growth of infectious organisms (yeast and/or bacteria). The type of topical treatment chosen is dependent on a variety of factors but usually involves either a short or long-acting topical ointment or liquid. There are many ways to treat and manage ear infections in dogs and cats. There is not a “one-size-fits-all” solution.

PREVENTION OF FUTURE EAR INFECTIONS:

Prevention of future ear infections typically involves an active, on-going process that addresses the underlying primary cause. It can not be understated how important regular use of an effective external parasiticide (flea/tick) medication is with dogs and cats with ear infections and symptoms referable to allergies. Active management of primary allergies is crucial. Regular use (daily to multiple times per week as an example) of an effective ear cleaner or medicated ear cleaner/flush is a common treatment to help prevent future infections. Understanding of the symptoms associated with ear infection and prompt intervention when signs develop is important. Generally speaking, acute ear infections are easier to treat and resolve than chronic ear infections.

PROGNOSIS: For a variety of reasons, ear infections often will be recurrent. Some dogs and cats only develop ear infections in one ear and will only be relatively limited in their occurrences - i.e. once per year. Other dogs and cats can develop frequently recurrent ear infections. With some dogs recurrent ear infections can perpetuate future ear infections. The frequency and severity of ear infections is a significant factor in determining the best course of action going forward to help guide both treatment and management of the ear infections specifically but also of the underlying, primary, or perpetuating factors involved.

