

Otitis Externa (Ear infection)

Otitis externa is inflammation of the external ear. Ear inflammation is common in pets and has many causes. The main cause is the anatomy of the ear. The ear canal is an inverted “L”. This characteristic plus the warmth and enclosed nature of the ear canal provide an excellent environment for infectious agents that cause inflammation. Animals with large, heavy floppy ears or hairy ears, seem to have the most problems. Ear infections are usually caused by bacteria but yeast and mites can also be a problem. Another common cause is allergies. Other causes leading to chronic inflammation include food allergies, excessive moisture, certain skin conditions, and hypothyroidism. The goal is to find and treat any current infections and prevent further recurrences.

Signs of Otitis include shaking the head, scratching or rubbing the ears. Sometimes, a head tilt towards the infected ear, an odor or a discharge may be present.

Diagnosing an ear infection requires visualizing the ear canal and eardrum with an otoscope. If the ear is very painful, this can be hard to do and may require sedation. Other tests may include microscopic examination, ear cultures, thyroid studies, allergy testing or therapeutic trials with hypoallergenic diets.

Most ear inflammations can be treated successfully and specifically with medications. Others require preventative measures to avoid recurrences. Do not allow your pet to swim in lakes, ponds or rivers you wouldn't swim in. Swimming and bathing can lead to an infection. Place cotton in the animal's ears when bathing. Instill a water drying solution after swimming or bathing. Also, keep the ears clean of hair and any discharges. Chronic otitis externa can be frustrating to deal with and require a thorough workup to get a diagnosis and appropriate treatment. Even with a know cause, it may require lifelong care and treatment. The most severe cases, which lead to a closed ear canal may require surgery.

Remember – the earlier you detect and treat an ear infection, the less painful it is for your pet and the easier it is for you to treat.