

### **Chronic Ear Disease in Dogs**

There are many types of ear disease in dogs. Sometimes dogs get grass seeds trapped in the ear canal or develop an ear infection after swimming and these will normally resolve quickly with appropriate treatment. However, some dogs are affected by chronic, repeated bouts of ear infections – this is called Otitis Externa (which means inflammation of the ear). This can be painful and occur regularly, and have a negative impact on a dog's quality of life. Some owners feel the relationship they have with their dog is affected by the need to constantly medicate the ears.

#### ***What is Otitis Externa and why does it develop?***

Otitis externa means inflammation of the external ear canal. There are many factors involved in the development of otitis externa. Foreign bodies usually affect one ear only and are easy to resolve by pulling out the foreign body. Disease in both ears suggests parasitic infection or an underlying disease such as hypersensitivity (atopic disease or food allergy), keratinisation disorders (seen in animals with endocrine disease) or auto-immune diseases, but otitis may start in one ear initially. Most dogs with atopic disease usually have concurrent skin disease, but a quarter of dogs with food allergy will have no skin changes and present with otitis externa only.

Usually chronic otitis externa arises as a progression from milder episodes. It therefore represents failure of the management of early disease. The best treatment for chronic otitis externa is therefore prevention.

Primary factors are those that initiate otitis externa on their own by altering the micro-environment of the external ear and initiating an inflammatory response e.g. grass awn, ear mites.

Predisposing factors will not cause otitis externa, but will make otitis externa more likely to persist in the face of treatment. They may also increase the likelihood of chronic ear disease becoming established and irreversible changes occurring. They include:

- anatomic factors
- prior disease – recurrent episodes of inflammation
- underlying generalised skin disease such as allergies
- concurrent otitis media (middle ear infection)
- water in the external canal from swimming or overuse of ear cleaners
- a mass blocking the ear canal
- other environmental factors

Infection of the ear canal, reaction of the tissues to inflammation causing narrowing of the ear canal or inappropriate medication and rupture of the tympanic membrane (ear drum) will all perpetuate the ear disease and delay resolution.

#### ***When does your dog require referral?***

Dogs are usually referred initially to the Dermatology Service, when the primary veterinary surgeon and the owner recognise that the medical management being used is not preventing recurrent episodes of otitis externa or if a single episode is not rapidly brought under control. Some dogs develop very painful infected ears and may develop infection with *Pseudomonas* bacteria – this can be hard to get under control and a dermatology referral will be beneficial.

It is beneficial to a dog to have early referral for ear disease to avoid the development of chronic otitis externa, and avoid the need for surgery if possible. Dermatological investigation aims to:

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- identify underlying diseases that cause otitis externa, and manage them where possible, to avoid chronic flare-up of ear disease
- manage the current episode of ear disease and reduce the risks of recurrence

### ***How can ear disease be investigated?***

Investigation starts with a thorough history and general physical examination. Ear examination is necessary and this can be performed in a conscious dog if tolerated. If your dog has painful ears and doesn't tolerate ear examination, or if the ear canals are very narrow, your dog may need sedation or anaesthesia for a full assessment. Samples are taken to look for the types of cells present in the ear and cultures are taken to identify which infection is present, to help decide which medication is best. Blood tests and skin allergy tests may be needed to look for underlying diseases that may be causing ear disease.

Imaging of the ear may be needed if we think your dog also has middle ear infection (otitis media). Computed tomography (CT) scans are used and can be obtained easily under anaesthesia.

Based on these findings, medical treatment for ear disease may be given, and the dermatologist will be able to advise you on long-term expectations.

### ***Will my dog need surgery?***

Some dogs have repeated episodes of ear disease and eventually the ear canal becomes so narrow and diseased that medical management can no longer be effective. Some dogs have surgery earlier than others, particularly if an owner is unable to manage ear treatments or if an individual dog will not tolerate medical management. Our Soft Tissue Surgery and Dermatology services work closely together, and we may recommend that a dog sees a clinician from both services before suggesting the most appropriate treatment for your dog.

### ***What surgery does my dog need?***

Some dogs have ear disease that only affects the first part of the ear canal, and they can have a surgery to open the ear canal (Lateral Wall Resection) and make it easier to medicate. However, most dogs with chronic ear disease have the entire external ear canal affected, and may also have middle ear disease. These dogs require a Total Ear Canal Ablation (TECA) to remove the external ear canal and lining of the middle ear.

The goal of TECA is to remove the painful focus of ear disease. It is a salvage surgery that is offered to dogs whose quality of life is being affected by the chronic pain of ear disease. Owners often report that their dogs are happier and enjoy life more after the procedure. There is some loss of hearing, but this is usually compensated for by a much better quality of life and no pain.

If your vet or our Dermatologist think your dog will benefit from surgery for end stage otitis externa, a Soft Tissue Surgeon will see you for an appointment to determine if surgery is suitable and to explain the procedure. As with all treatments available to animals, there can be complications with surgery, but these will be discussed in full with you. The risk of serious complications is low.

### ***What happens after surgery?***

Our Anaesthetists will create an overnight pain relief plan for your dog. Most dogs are comfortable the morning after surgery and can come home with additional pain killers. The wound is usually healed by 10 days after surgery, when your dog will be able to return to normal walks.

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