

Orthopaedics
Oncology

Medicine
Dermatology

Soft tissue surgery
Specialist Imaging

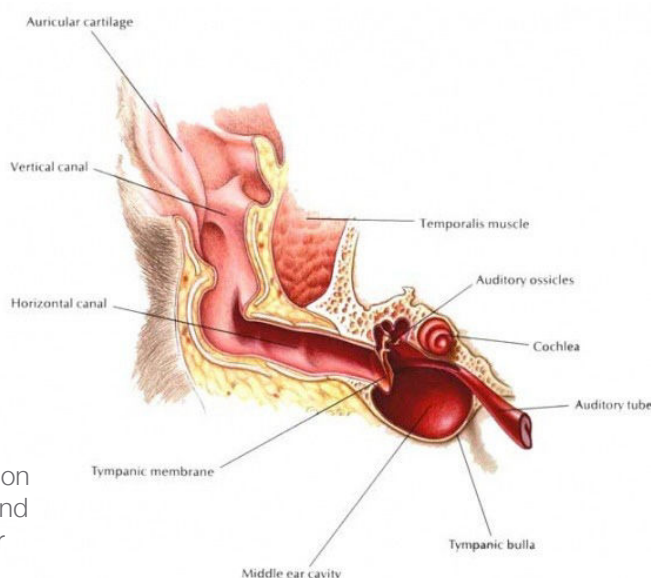
Cardiology
Anaesthesia

Neurology
Physiotherapy

Ear surgery in cats and dogs

There are many causes of ear disease in dogs and cats. Dogs are most often affected with an infection of the outer ear canal (otitis externa) and this may be caused by a foreign body (such as a grass seed), infection following swimming or secondary to generalised allergic skin disease. Nearly all of these will resolve quickly with treatment dispensed by your vet. However some dogs are affected by chronic, repeated bouts of ear infections and at this stage, your vet may recommend referral for further investigation as ear infections are very painful and can negatively impact your dog or cat's quality of life.

Ear surgery is indicated in a number of specific situations. Sometimes the pinna (ear flap) or ear canal is removed to treat cancer, but this is not the most common indication for ear surgery in either the dog or cat. The commonest indication for ear surgery in the dog is to treat chronic ear infections, and in the cat is to treat polyps or inflammation of the middle ear (the part behind the ear drum).



Ear Surgery in the dog

Many dogs are susceptible to ear infections. This may be due to the conformation (shape) of the ear canal or secondary to infections acquired due to generalised skin disease or allergies, swimming in rivers or grass seeds. The commonest breed affected is the Cocker Spaniel, which has ears that have a closed humid environment combined with a breed predisposition to generalised skin infections such as Malassezia (yeast infection). If the ear infections become chronic (ongoing) and unresponsive to medical management your vet may recommend referral for further investigation.

Dogs are usually seen by our dermatologist first to identify the underlying disease causing the persistence of the ear infections and to control or prevent flare ups of the disease in the future. If the underlying disease is quickly controlled, then ear surgery may never be necessary. It is beneficial for a dog to have early referral for ear disease to prevent the development of chronic changes in the ear canal and avoid the need for surgery if possible.

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The dermatologist will take a thorough clinical history and take samples from the ear canal to look at the cells and culture bacteria to establish what pathogens are present. If possible we examine the ear conscious, but sometimes the ears are too painful and this can only be done effectively under sedation or anaesthesia. Deeper samples can be taken at this stage, and if we suspect that the ear drum is ruptured and there is infection or disease in the middle ear then we will recommend a CT scan. This shows us whether or not medical management is ever going to be successful and is often the single most important criteria for recommending ear surgery. In some cases, however, the long history of management of ear infections at home has resulted in a breakdown of the owner's relationship with their dog and a single step solution is recommended – and this essentially is likely to involve surgery to remove the painful ear canal.

If the CT and examination findings indicate that surgery is necessary, the dog is transferred to our Soft Tissue Surgery service who work closely with the dermatologist.

The surgery aims to remove all the tissue associated with the ear canal as well as to remove debris in the middle ear and the lining of the middle ear (Total Ear Canal Ablation or TECA). The goal of this surgery is to remove the painful ear canal and is an end stage procedure aiming to improve the dog's quality of life. Dogs that have both ears affected can have the surgery done in one session without any increase in potential complications. Owners often report that their dog is much happier and enjoy life more after the procedure. There is some loss of hearing, but this is more than compensated for by a much better quality of life and no pain.

After surgery, the dog is hospitalised for 1-2 days. Nearly all dogs are comfortable the day following surgery and able to be discharged with some oral medications for pain relief and antibiotics. There is no special nursing requirement other than keeping your dog quiet and clean and dry while the wound heals.

Post operative complications include nerve damage (which may be temporary), haemorrhage, wound infections and hearing loss. A potential long term complication is the formation of an abscess underneath the ear if the infection recurs, which would require further surgery. Many owners are worried about hearing loss, but in fact, most dogs with chronic ear infections already have reduced hearing. Post operatively, they can still hear high pitched or loud noises through bone conduction through the skull.

In experienced hands, this surgery is relatively low risk in most breeds of dogs and success rates should be at least 90%.

Ear Surgery in the cat

Cats do get infections and cancer of the external ear canal, but these diseases are much less common than in the dog. It is more frequent to find polyps or a middle ear infection, which is when the inflammation occurs in the space behind the ear drum at the bottom of the ear canal.

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Symptoms include head shaking, holding the head on one side (head tilt), nystagmus (flicking of the eyes from side to side), ataxia (staggering), and nausea/vomiting. This is because the inflammation in the middle ear can affect the inner ear where the nerves and organs involved in balance are located and this causes vestibulitis. Sometimes the polyp grows down the Eustachian tube from the middle ear and into the back of the throat where it may cause nasal obstruction, with snoring and gagging being the main symptoms.

Diagnosis is usually made using a CT scan, but sometimes your vet may have looked down the ear canal and seen a polyp poking out of the middle ear. Surgery for middle ear disease in the cat is via an incision underneath the jaw, to access the middle ear directly and the ear canal is not normally removed. The middle ear is flushed out and the polyp removed. Some cats have both ears affected but we perform this surgery one side at a time, with about 4-6 weeks between surgeries. This is because when both ears are operated on at the same time, occasionally there are severe complications including death. Performing the surgery one side at a time rarely causes severe complications and is much safer. However, even when only one side is operated on sometimes this surgery can make the symptoms worse for a period of time and the cat may have to be hospitalised for several days to ensure that it does not get dehydrated while the vestibulitis resolves. In some cases the symptoms improve, but never completely resolve and the cat may be left with mild nerve damage which alters the head carriage or eye position.

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