OTITIS* IN DOGS: Questions and answers

* Inflammation of the ear canal

1) What does my dog's ear look like?

- **External ear canals**: begins at the outside opening of the ear (ear flap) and extends inward to the vertical and horizontal canals
- **Middle ear**: cavity directly on the other side of the eardrum.
- **Inner ear**: bony structure next to the ear drum where the balance and hearing systems originate

2) What causes my dog to get an otitis?

There are many factors that may cause an inflammation of the ear canal. These are divided in 3 categories:

1) **Predisposing factors** increase the risk of developing ear inflammation.
   - Breed predispositions: Ear conformation (e.g., Cocker spaniel have pendulous ears), hair in the ear canals (e.g., Poodles), excessive ear wax production (e.g., Cocker spaniels, Labradors)
   - Excessive moisture (swimmer’s ear; baths…etc)
   - Inadequate or excessive ear cleaning
   - Aggressive hair removal in the ears

2) **Primary factors** which are directly responsible for the inflammation:
   - Parasites: ear mites
   - Food allergies: 50-80% of dogs with food allergies will develop an ear infection. 20-25% of them will have recurrent otitis as the only symptom.
   - Seasonal allergies: during summer, 50-80% of dogs have episode(s) of external ear infections
   - Hypothyroidism
3) **Perpetuating factors** prevent the resolution and/or perpetuate the inflammation:

- Yeast infection
- Bacterial infection
- Inner-Middle ear infection: up to 50% of dogs with external otitis have middle and/or inner ear infections!!
- Allergic reaction to ear solutions/medications.
- Inadequate treatment
- Stenosis of the canal lumen (hardening and narrowing of the canal due to recurrent ear infections)

3) **How can I know my dog has an otitis?**

When he or she demonstrates one or more of these symptoms:

- Ear scratching and/or head shaking
- Redness on the ear flap(s)
- Presence of abnormal and smelly secretions
- Sensitive ears
- Lethargy and loss of appetite
- Head tilted and/or loss of balance

4) **When should I consult my vet?**

You should consult your vet as soon as you notice one or more of the symptoms listed above. When untreated for a long period, an external ear infection:

- May cause hardening, narrowing and thickening of the ear canal
- Can stimulate the growth of undesirable bacteria
- May spread deeper and rupture the ear drum, causing an inner and/or middle ear infection.

These complications will make the diagnostic approach more complex, and will result in a longer and more expensive treatment. Furthermore, your dog may become more susceptible to ear infections in the future!!

5) **Why does my vet need to see my dog for an otitis?**

The vet needs to...

- Know your dog’s medical history especially regarding ear and skin problems.
- Do a complete physical examination
- Look at an ear secretion sample under the microscope to identify and properly treat the bacteria, yeast and/or parasites involved in the infection.
- Make additional tests: sometimes an ear secretion sample needs to be sent to a laboratory for specific tests, a sedation/anesthesia needs to be done in order to make a better otoscopic examination or a thorough cleaning of the infected ear must be performed etc.
- Identify and treat if possible the primary cause(s) of the otitis

6) **Is it necessary to come back three weeks later for another check-up?**

It is very important to follow your vet’s instructions and be back for another check-up if needed. Most of the time, your dog’s ear may look much better and healed from the outside but a deeper otoscopic examination may reveal that the ear isn’t completely healed.

If treatment is stopped too soon, the infection will be back within a few weeks.

Numerous ear treatments are painful and frustrating to your dog. Moreover they are costly!

**PREVENTION IS ALWAYS BETTER THAN CURE!!!**

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