

A Very Common Canine Ear Problem but It's Easily Avoidable

Hijack this common canine problem. It's so simple, only an uncaring owner would neglect it. And in the rare event this simple preventive doesn't work, here's an all-natural solution that gives a 90% resolution in 21 days.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Chronic ear infections in dogs are common, even though preventing them is often as easy as simply cleaning the ears when they need it
- An ear infection (otitis externa) is caused by either a fungus or much more often, bacteria. The most common cause of fungal ear infections is yeast
- It's important to find out what type of organism is causing your dog's ear infection so that the correct medication is given
- Medical grade manuka honey and green clay may also provide symptom relief in dogs with resistant bacterial ear infections
- Prevention should be the goal. Clean your dog's ears as often as necessary to keep them dry and free of wax buildup and debris, especially if your pet is prone to otitis externa

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Chronic ear infections are a fact of life for many dogs, which is really unfortunate, because it's pretty easy to prevent them if you know what to do (more about that shortly). I suspect many persistent ear infections in dogs are treated, but never actually resolved.

I also believe there isn't enough emphasis placed on routine ear maintenance for canine companions.

There are two basic causes of ear problems in dogs: chronic inflammation and infection. Untreated inflammation can lead to infection. If your dog's ears are warm to the touch, red, swollen or itchy, but there's little to no discharge, chances are the problem is inflammation.

However, if one or more of those symptoms is present along with obvious discharge, it's usually a sign of infection.

3 Causes of Ear Inflammation in Dogs

1. The most common reason for ear inflammation in dogs is allergies. An **allergic response** to food or something in the environment can cause inflammation throughout your pet's body, including the ears.

A dog with allergy-related ear inflammation will sometimes run his head along furniture or the carpet trying to relieve his misery. He may also scratch at his ears incessantly, or shake his head a lot.

If your dog is doing any of these things, be sure to check his ears for telltale signs of redness and swelling.

2. Another cause of ear inflammation is moisture, also known as "swimmer's ear." We see this primarily during the summer months when dogs are outdoors playing in lakes, ponds and pools.

Wet ear canals coupled with a warm body temperature are the perfect environment for inflammation and/or infection to develop. That's why it's important to thoroughly dry your dog's ears each time he comes out of the water.

Dogs who live in high humidity areas, play in the rain or snow or get water in their ears when they visit the groomer are also at risk.

3. The third major reason for ear problems is wax buildup. The presence of earwax is normal, but dogs have varying amounts just as humans do. Some dogs need their ears cleaned of wax daily, while others never have a buildup.

Certain breeds produce more wax than others, such as Labradors and other retrievers who tend to love the water. If you have one of these breeds, you should get your dog accustomed to having her ears cleaned while she's a puppy.

Other breeds, such as Bulldogs, Cocker Spaniels and Poodles, can also produce an abundance of wax that needs regular attention.

Triggers for Ear Infections in Dogs

Ear infections in dogs typically involve the outer canal, which is quite deep. The medical term for these infections is otitis externa. If the infection recurs or never really clears, we call it chronic otitis. There are a number of things that can cause otitis including:

- Foreign material in the ear, such as from a plant like a foxtail
- Water in the ear that creates a moist, warm environment perfect for brewing an infection
- Excess glands in the ears that produce wax and sebum
- Narrowing of the ear canal
- Heavy, hanging ears (think Basset Hound or Cocker Spaniel)

If your dog has an ear infection, it's very important to identify whether it's a bacterial or fungal infection, or both, in order to treat the problem effectively.

Is the Infection Fungal or Bacterial?

The most common cause of fungal ear infections in dogs is yeast. Yeast is always present on the bodies of animals, but when the immune system isn't in prime condition, the fungus can grow out of control and cause an infection.

Most dogs prone to yeast infections need to have their ears cleaned and dried frequently. If the problem seems chronic or there's a persistent infection that just won't resolve, there's probably an underlying immunological cause that should be investigated.

For more information on the general subject of yeast, including how to deal with yeasty ears, view my video and article on **[yeast infections in dogs](#)**.

Bacterial infections of the ear are actually more common than fungal infections. Bacteria are either pathogenic or non-pathogenic. Pathogenic bacteria are abnormal inhabitants of your pet's body, picked up from an outside source, for example, contaminated pond water.

Non-pathogenic bacteria are typically staph bacteria that are normal inhabitants of your dog's body. Occasionally these bacteria can overgrow and overwhelm the ear canal. Any normal, helpful bacteria can grow out of control and cause an infection in a dog with a compromised immune system.

An Accurate Diagnosis and Appropriate Therapy Is Essential

Veterinarians diagnose yeast infections with cytology, which means looking at a smear of the ear debris under a microscope.

An accurate diagnosis of a bacterial ear infection requires an ear culture. Your veterinarian will swab your dog's ear and send the sample to a lab to determine what type of organism is present, and what medication will most effectively treat it.

Never let your veterinarian simply guess at what bacteria is causing your pet's ear infection. Instead, ask them to find out.

It's very important to finish the medication your veterinarian prescribes, even if your dog's ear infection seems to clear up before the medication is gone. Stopping the medication early can lead to regrowth of resistant organisms.

In addition, while your dog is being treated for an ear infection, be sure to keep his ears clean and clear of gunk so the topical medication you put into the ears can reach the infected tissue. Otherwise, you're just adding more fluid to warm, sticky ear goo, and the bacteria will continue to thrive.

Unfortunately, an ever-increasing number of ear infection culture results are showing the presence of bacteria that are resistant to many (if not all) conventional medications. These are cases in which holistic therapies are not only a last hope, but can provide highly effective, non-toxic relief.

Manuka Honey and Green Clay: Alternative Treatments for Bacterial Ear Infections

Interestingly, a recent study tested the effectiveness of manuka honey in treating bacterial ear infections in 15 dogs. The dogs were given 1 milliliter (mL) of medical grade honey in the ear daily during the 21-day study. The researchers reported the honey "promoted rapid clinical progress," with 70% of the dogs achieving a "clinical cure" between seven and 14 days, and 90% by day 21.¹

In addition, the bacteria-killing activity of the honey worked against all bacteria species tested, including multiple strains of drug-resistant bacteria. The study authors concluded, "Medical grade honey was successful in both clinical and laboratory settings, thus demonstrating its potential of becoming an alternative treatment for canine OE [otitis externa]."

It's important to note that it doesn't appear the antimicrobial activity of honey is enough on its own to resolve every ear infection. Most of the dogs in the study had complete symptom relief by day 21; however, several still had bacterial infections.

Applied zoopharmacognosy expert Caroline Ingraham suggests using green clay in cases where other natural treatments have failed to completely resolve resistant ear infections.² Green clay has been documented to effectively treat a variety of bacteria that have been implicated in chronic ear infections, including pseudomonas and MRSA.³

Preventing Ear Infections in Your Own Dog

Some dogs are much more prone to ear infections than others. If your canine companion is one of them, I recommend checking her ears daily or every other day at a minimum. Remember, wax, moisture or other debris left in the ear canal sets the table for an infection. The solution is simple: Clean your pet's ears when they're dirty. If there's lots of wax accumulating every day, they need to be cleaned every day.

If your dog's ears don't produce much wax or collect much crud, you can clean them less often, but check them daily and address issues as soon as you see the ear canal isn't 100% clean and dry.

If you think your pet might already have an ear infection, it's important to make an appointment with your veterinarian before you begin a cleaning regimen. In many cases, an infection leads to rupture of the eardrum, which requires special cleaning solutions and medications. For taking care of healthy canine ears, my favorite cleaning agents include:

- Witch hazel
- Organic apple cider vinegar mixed with an equal amount of purified water
- Hydrogen peroxide, a few drops on a cotton round dabbed in coconut oil
- Green tea or calendula infusion (using tea that has been cooled)
- One drop tea tree oil mixed with 1 tablespoon coconut oil (for dogs only — never cats)

Under no circumstances should you use rubbing alcohol to clean your dog's ears. It can cause burning and irritation, especially if there's inflammation.

Use cotton balls or cotton rounds only to clean the inside of the ear canal. You can use cotton swabs to clean the outer area of the ear, but never inside the canal, as they can damage your dog's eardrums. The best method for cleaning most dogs' ears is to saturate a cotton ball with cleaning solution and swab out the inside of the ear. Use as many cotton balls as necessary to remove all the dirt and debris.

Another approach is to squirt a small amount of solution directly into the ear, then follow with cotton balls to wipe the ears clean. Be prepared, however, that this method may make your dog shake her head wildly, flinging ear cleaning solution all over you and the surrounding area!

Just a Few Minutes of Cleaning Can Keep Your Dog's Ears Healthy

Cleaning your dog's ears really isn't difficult, but you do have to remember to do it consistently (as often as your individual dog requires it). Just a few minutes spent cleaning and drying your pet's ears as necessary (this means daily, in many cases) will make a huge difference in the frequency and severity of ear infections — especially in dogs who are prone to them. You can advance the following video to 12:05 to watch me clean my own dog's ears after a bath:

[Download Transcript](#)

Sources and References

[Modesto Bee August 7, 2016](#)

[Clinician's Brief August 2016](#)

¹ [Veterinary Dermatology, 2016 Apr;27\(2\).](#)

² [Medical Xpress, April 7, 2008](#)

³ [ScienceDaily, January 11, 2016](#)
