

The Unique Dog Language Many Owners Ignore

Most people think this pair of features has a practical purpose, but rather, this study shows they are a source of canine body language that can reveal how a dog is feeling. Yet most owners don't know where to begin to understand all the signs. Here's a quick cheat sheet to help get you in tune.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs communicate with the world in a number of ways, one of which is through ear positions
- Canine ears come in many different shapes and sizes, and they're used for more than just a keen sense of hearing; the muscles in the ears allow dogs to tilt, turn, raise, and lower their ears, and move them independently
- Understanding your dog's ear language takes a bit of practice, and should also involve observing his eyes, mouth, tail, and vocalizations
- Even during the quiet of overnight hours, the world is noisy to your dog, because he hears sounds you don't even realize exist
- A dog who suddenly begins holding her ears in an unusual way, or is scratching or digging at one or both ears, should be checked for a possible ear infection

Unlike your average set of human ears, a dog's ears are a significant feature of the head and face. Dog ears come in a wide range of shapes and sizes — some are long and floppy, while others are short and erect. Some dogs' ears are covered with hair inside and out, while others are dressed in only a fine layer of fuzz.

Everyone knows dogs have excellent hearing, especially compared to humans, but there are many other unique and interesting characteristics of your dog's ears you might not even be aware of.

Canine Ears Aren't Just for Hearing

According to the authors of a 2018 Italian study, dog ear positions are a feature of canine body language that can provide information about how they're feeling:

"Generally speaking, dogs can pull their ears back various degrees according to the animals' arousal state. Ears can vary from simply 'back,' to communicate an appeasement intention, to 'flattened' or 'pressed back,' in frightened individuals or as an agonistic response. In extremely fearful individuals, ears can be pressed back so far on the head that they completely disappear ('seal ears'). On the contrary, ears kept forward are associated with interest, attention, and approach-oriented intentions, while sideward position indicates a conflicting inner state ('airplane ears')."¹

Learning to interpret your dog's ear language takes a bit of careful observation, while simultaneously noting her eyes, mouth, tail, and vocal tone. Here's a quick cheat sheet to help you interpret your canine BFF's ear positions:

- **Ears up (or one ear up and the other half or semi up)** — Your dog is attentive and listening
- **Ears rotated in slightly different directions** — She may be listening to sounds emanating from an area off to the side
- **Ears up and tight (almost touching)** — He's very intense and could be about to charge at something
- **Ears back and down** — Your dog is relaxed or showing submission; if the ears are tightly down, she's probably stressed

Stay Alert for Ear Infections

If your dog is holding one or both ears in an abnormal position, is pawing or scratching at an ear, or if you notice an unpleasant odor, he may have an ear infection. Unfortunately, recurring ear problems are very common in dogs. Otitis externa is the medical term for inflammation or infection of the outer canal of the ear, and some dogs are more prone to the condition than others.

There are many misconceptions among dog parents about what causes itchy, inflamed, infected ears, and how best to deal with them. Among them:

1. **Fiction:** "All ear infections are the same, so I can use the same medicine that worked the last time."

Fact: Ear infections are caused by a variety of different organisms, and it's very important to find out the precise pathogen involved in order to successfully treat the problem. Fungal infections are treated very differently than bacterial infections. In dogs with recurring ear infections, it's also important that your veterinarian determine if the problem is new or an old unresolved infection.

2. **Fiction:** "If I pluck the hairs out of my dog's ears, my dog will never get another ear infection."

Fact: Ear hair has a purpose, so unless it's causing a problem or is aggravating an existing infection, it's not a good idea to remove it, and especially not by plucking. Plucking itself can cause irritation and inflammation.

3. **Fiction:** "My dog has an ear infection because he caught it from another animal."

Fact: Ear infections aren't contagious. They occur secondary to an inflammatory process typically caused by allergies, moisture in the ear, or wax buildup. Changes to the environment in the ear can set the stage for a bacterial or **yeast infection**.

4. **Fiction:** "My dog scratches, licks, or chews because he's bored, grooming himself, or imitating the family cat."

Fact: Dogs almost never scratch continuously for any reason other than because they're itchy. If your dog is scratching, licking, biting, and chewing at himself, he's itchy and it's probably an allergy that's making him miserable. But not always! Many allergic dogs are predisposed to itchy, inflamed ears, so make an appointment with your vet to find the cause of your pet's discomfort.

5. **Fiction:** "My dog's ears will be cured so he'll never get another infection."

Fact: If your four-legged family member is predisposed to ear infections, prevention is actually the only

permanent “cure.” If you don’t take steps to manage the root cause of the problem, the two of you will be dealing with her miserable ear infections intermittently throughout her life.

Take a look at [**11 Reasons Why Your Dog May Be Struggling With Ear Issues**](#) for much more information on the causes of ear infections, and how to recognize, prevent, and treat them.

14 Fun Facts About Your Dog’s Ears

1. Certain breeds, for example, herding breeds like the Shetland Sheepdog, may have an edge in the hearing department over other breeds due to the jobs they’ve been bred to do. For example, the sooner a dog protecting a flock of sheep hears a predator or some other danger, the more quickly he can act.
2. Whereas the muscles in human ears seem pretty much useless, the muscles in your dog’s ears – around 18 in number – allow for an impressive range of movement. Dogs can tilt, turn, raise, and lower their ears, and move them independently. And for most dogs, the ears significantly enhance their facial expressions.
3. As noted above, dogs move their ears not only to hear better, but also to express emotions. The position of your dog’s ears can give you clues as to how she’s feeling from one moment to the next.
4. You can tell how much attention your dog is paying to you by watching her ears. If they are erect and facing forward, she’s engaged, and if they’re pulled-back a bit, she’s feeling friendly. However, if her ears are laid tightly back against her head, she’s probably feeling fearful or shy.
5. Another function of a dog’s ear is balance, and in fact, inner ear infections are a frequent cause for loss of balance.
6. The canine ear canal is L-shaped. It’s vertical toward the jaw, then takes a 45-degree turn horizontally toward the ear drum. This structure is one of the reasons dogs are prone to a variety of ear issues.
7. Domestic dogs hear at higher frequencies than people do, although not as high as cats. Some whistles can’t be heard by human ears, but dogs hear them very clearly.
8. According to scientists, dogs only discriminate resolutions of about one third of an octave. Humans, on the other hand, can discriminate resolutions as fine as one-twelfth of an octave.
9. It is thought that dogs hear about four times better than we do. **Cocking his head** may help your dog tune in sounds far off in the distance. (Or it could be he knows how completely irresistible he is with his head cocked!)
10. Puppies are born deaf because their ear canals are still closed. They begin to hear when they are a few weeks old.
11. Dogs are very adept at filtering out some sounds, while remaining alert for others. Have you ever noticed how your dog can hear a car pulling into your driveway or garage over the sound of the TV, the kids playing, or other household noises?
12. **Congenital (from birth) deafness** has been reported in 85 breeds, for example, Dalmatians. Older dogs can develop hearing problems as well.
13. Tigger, a Bloodhound from St. Joseph, Illinois, holds the Guinness Book of World Records title for longest ears. Tigger’s right ear measures 12.75 inches, and his left measures 13.5 inches. Bloodhounds have such long ears to help direct scent to their sensitive noses.
14. Even during the dead of night, the world is still a noisy place for your dog. This is because she can hear sounds you don’t even know exist, such as the high-frequency pulse emanating from your digital alarm clock, or the vibrations of termites in the walls!

Sources and References

[Whole Dog Journal May 2, 2023](#)

[dvm360 March 7, 2019](#)

¹ [Siniscalchi, M. et al. Communication in Dogs, Animals \(Basel\), 2018 Aug; 8\(8\): 131](#)
