

Foxtail Plants: Summer's Stealthy Danger to Dogs

Uncover the hidden threat of foxtail plants, summer's silent adversary targeting dogs with its sharp seeds. Unveil the strategies to identify, prevent, and tackle this botanical hazard, ensuring a safe season for your four-legged friends.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Summer is on the way, which means foxtail (plant awn) season depending on where you live and travel with canine family members
- Foxtails are so dangerous because they can quickly make their way into your dog's body through virtually any orifice, including the nose, eyes, ears and mouth; they can also puncture the skin; if foxtails get inside your dog's body, they can create abscesses, damage tissue, cause infection, and worse
- If you take your dog to outdoor locations where plant awns grow, it's crucial that you check her from nose to tail several times a day, and remove any foxtails in her coat or between her toes
- If you know or suspect a foxtail has invaded your dog's nose or throat or ear, or you see an oozing sore or draining tract, get her to a veterinarian or emergency animal clinic right away

Summer is on the way, which means depending on where you live, foxtail plants will soon be posing a significant warm weather hazard for dogs. According to emergency and critical care veterinarian Dr. Christina Fernandez, writing for PetMD:

"... [T]he seeds from these annoying weeds are designed to burrow into the ground. If they attach to your pet's coat and burrow into the skin, this can lead to pain, infection, and sometimes more serious issues. Foxtails can also be inhaled, lodged in the ears, swallowed, and embedded in the paws."¹

Foxtails appear in the spring, are in full bloom during the summer months, and die off during the winter. They are treacherous little plant awns that grow from the ear or flower of many types of grasses. They have hairy-looking little appendages that have spikes and sharp edges designed to attach securely to whatever or whoever happens by so they can spread their seeds to surrounding areas.

Foxtails grow all over California, have been reported in almost every state west of the Mississippi, and are spreading to the east coast of the U.S. as well. There are several varieties, both native and non-native, but only some have harmful spurs.

One dangerous variety is foxtail barley, which is found across the U.S. except in the south Atlantic and Gulf Coast states, and also grows throughout Canada and in parts of Mexico. Other harmful varieties include the giant foxtail, cheatgrass, and ripgut brome.

In recent years, midwestern states have seen a sharp increase in foxtail-related infections in dogs, especially sporting and hunting dogs who run through thick brush where they can inhale or swallow foxtails.

Bottom line: if you live where foxtails grow, you and your dog can encounter them in parks, open fields, on city sidewalks, and even in your own backyard.

Why Foxtails Are so Dangerous

In late spring and early summer, foxtail plant heads turn brown and dry, and scatter across the landscape. The tiny spikes on the plant heads allow them to burrow into soil, and wildlife also helps spread them around.

Virtually any exposure your dog has to grass awns is potentially hazardous. The foxtails inevitably make their way into the noses, eyes, ears, mouths, and just about every other opening of dogs' bodies, including the vulva and penis. They can get deep into your dog's nostril or ear canal or under the skin in no time, and often too fast for you to even notice them.

These deadly little plant heads can burrow into your dog's fur and pierce the skin, often between the toes. They can end up virtually anywhere in your pet's body, and symptoms depend on where the foxtail is located. For example, if your dog is shaking her head, there could be a foxtail in an ear canal. If she's suddenly **sneezing** uncontrollably, she could have one in her nose. Foxtails in the lungs can cause coughing and difficulty breathing.

A dog's body isn't capable of processing foxtails and can neither degrade nor decompose them. To make matters worse, foxtails carry bacteria and can only move in one direction (forward). Unless they're found early, they can continue to travel throughout a dog's body, creating abscesses, damaging tissue, and causing grass awn disease.

A grass awn infection can be very difficult to diagnose, in part because the infection occurs behind the migrating foxtail. In addition, foxtails are hard to see using traditional imaging techniques, because they are small, covered with infection and scar tissue, and are invisible on x-rays.

As you can probably imagine, once a foxtail is roaming around inside your dog's body, it can be incredibly difficult to find. It's not uncommon for veterinarians to perform multiple surgeries before a foxtail is finally located and removed.

Signs of a Foxtail Invasion

If you live in a foxtail-endemic area, keep an eye out for the following signs in your dog:²

- Head shaking
- Bloody nose
- Areas of redness or tenderness
- Limping
- Excessive licking of an area on the body
- Inflammation
- Pawing at the face
- Lumps

- Lethargy
- Snorting
- Bumps
- Depression
- Sneezing
- Draining tracts
- Decreased appetite

In a worst-case scenario, an embedded foxtail can enter vital organs, including the lungs, spinal cord or brain, heart, or abdominal organs, causing symptoms specific to that organ. Surgery may be required to remove foxtails or treat infection resulting from embedded foxtails.

When It's Safe to Remove Foxtails Yourself

If you see foxtails in your dog's coat or anywhere on the outside of her body, including between her toes, remove them immediately either by hand or with a brush.

However, if you suspect or know there's a plant awn in your dog's nose or another body opening, or if you see an oozing sore or drainage tract, it's best to take your dog to a veterinarian for removal. As I explained earlier, foxtails and other types of plant awns have spikes or hooks that dig into whatever surface they attach to, including flesh and tissue. Plant awns that are imbedded in tissue are very tricky to remove because they can break apart, leaving a portion of the awn behind.

Not only does the remaining piece of the foxtail continue to cause inflammation and infection at the entry site, but it typically moves forward and deeper into the skin. It can potentially migrate throughout the body, ending up almost anywhere.

Protecting Your Pet From Foxtails and Grass Awn Disease

One of the biggest challenges in keeping your dog safe from foxtails can be learning how to identify them. They are usually a golden-brown color, but depending on the variety they can be green, white, yellow, or dark brown, and can vary in size from about a half-inch to three inches in length, and one-eighth to a half inch in diameter.

To familiarize yourself with foxtails and other potentially dangerous plants where you live or visit with your dog, you can search the database at [**Center for Invasive Species and Ecosystem Health**](#) to see images of plants that grow in your area.

Obviously, avoiding foxtail exposure altogether should be the goal, but that's not always possible. If your dog does encounter foxtails, it's important to carefully comb through his coat, and also check his ears, mouth, and between his toes a few times each day to remove any that you find before they have an opportunity to wreak havoc on your pet's health.

If your dog has a long coat and spends a lot of time outdoors, consider trimming (not shaving) his coat during the warmer months, and don't forget the hair between his toes and pads.

Sources and References

^{1,2} [PetMD, June 30, 2020](#)
