

This One-Way Seasonal Menace Can Kill Your Pet

At this time of year, you can't be too careful when you take your pet outside. If this widely spread menace enters your pet's body through their eyes, ears, mouth, nose, skin, feet or genitals, it can quickly become a one-way deadly battle since your pet's body can't degrade or remove them.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The late spring and summer months mean foxtail (plant awn) season depending on where you live and travel with your dog
- Foxtails can quickly make their way into your dog's body through any opening, including the nose, eyes, ears and mouth; they can also puncture the skin
- Once inside the body, foxtails can create abscesses, damage tissue, cause infection and can potentially be lethal
- If you take your dog to outdoor locations where plant awns grow, it's imperative that you check him from nose to tail several times a day, and remove any foxtails in his coat or between his toes
- If you suspect a foxtail has made its way into your dog's nose or throat or ear, or you see an oozing sore or draining tract, get him to a veterinarian or emergency animal clinic right away

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The warm summer months are upon us, and I know many of you have lots of outdoor activities planned that include four-legged family members. So this is a good time for a reminder to avoid foxtails when you're out and about with your dog.

If you've never heard of them, foxtails 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 and When It's Safe to Remove Them

Signs that your dog may have encountered foxtails is sneezing if the invader got into his nose, pawing at the nose, and nasal drainage or infection. Foxtails that imbed in the skin typically cause inflammation, redness, irritation and oozing sores.

Other signs can include draining tracts (openings in the skin from which discharge drains), squinting, head shaking, excessive licking (especially the paws), scratching, chewing, lethargy, **depression** and loss of appetite. If a foxtail travels to the abdominal cavity, there can be fever and abdominal pain. Foxtails lodged in the vagina or urethra can cause pain and difficulty urinating.

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 embedded 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, including the lungs, abdominal organs, spinal cord and even the brain.

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 3 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. You might also want to check into these safety devices other dog owners have created to keep their canine companions free of foxtails:

- OutFox Field Guard
- Foxtailfree Hoodies

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)
