



Ear Infections in Dogs and Cats

Recently a veterinary colleague e-mailed our veterinary group an “ear maintenance” handout that his client received from a groomer in Wisconsin with a recipe for a homemade concoction including 16oz of rubbing alcohol, gentian violet and boric acid that promised to prevent and cure all ear infections and save lots of money.

The general reaction of the veterinarians reading the recipe was “how many poor dogs and cats are going to have that poured down their ears and endure incredible pain?” There was a general consensus that ear treatment should not be a do- it- yourself project for the pet owner.

Groomers certainly have a lot of contact with pets' ears. When they see material in an ear and guess that a dog or cat has an ear infection they may be right. However, there are many causes of ear problems that may look like an infection but are not. Parasites such as ear mites and mange mites cause ear infections. Ear lesions can be caused by autoimmune disease, hormonal imbalance, food allergy, regional allergy to pollen, sun exposure, fungal infection, and cutaneous cancer. There are many different types of bacterial ear infections each of which is treated differently. I’m sure that any one of us could go online to look up a hundred different ear medications to throw in our pet’s ear to see if it worked. Unfortunately, that is not a clear path to a diagnosis and a pain free cure.

If left unattended or treated improperly, an ear problem may cause lots of scratching and head shaking. Sometimes a blood vessel breaks in the earflap and causes a big blood bubble inside called a hematoma. If this occurs the pet’s ear has just become a surgical case because the hematoma needs to be drained and the ear repaired.

Lots of things can go on in a pet’s ear. Dogs, cats and rabbits have much longer ear canals than humans. The long cartilage canal lined with skin cells leads down to the eardrum (tympanic membrane). If that is ruptured anything you put in can cause a lot of pain. That is why you need to take your pet to the veterinarian if you see profuse wax in the canal, red ears, or continual scratching of the ear. Your veterinarian will look in the ear to see if the eardrum is still intact. Many times your veterinarian will take a sample of the exudate and look at it under the microscope. They will be able to tell if there is a fungal growth, yeast growth or a bacterial infection. Your vet will distinguish between broad types of bacterial infection based on the shape and staining of the bacteria. Ear mites will be noted if present. Presence of inflammatory cells under the microscope will be noted to determine the severity of infection. In that case a bacterial culture may need to be performed to isolate exactly what type of bacteria is growing and what antibiotics are most likely to be effective against the pathogen.

In more severe infections the pet may need to be sedated and have the ear flushed and cleaned. With all the wax and purulent exudate removed your veterinarian can then choose an appropriate medication and cleaner based on the ear swab findings. The medication will be able to contact the lining of the ear canal if it is clear of wax and debris.

Usually the ear is treated between 5 days and two weeks. At that point your vet will want to look in the ear again to check progress. A follow up ear swab gives accurate information as to whether the infection is gone. The ear may look good on the outside but deep in the canal there may still be infection. Sometimes several progress exams and ear swabs spaced at 1-2 week intervals are necessary to end the ear infection and the underlying cause.

The worst-case scenario is the chronic ear infection. Sometimes the bacteria and yeast hide in the cartilaginous nooks and crannies and the ulcerated thickened sore ear lining that has developed over years of infections. In some cases a cure takes months or years. In the case of allergies the infections can happen over and over again until the cause of the allergy is found. Some breeds of dogs are more prone to chronic ear infections due to their long floppy ears.

A wise groomer will note the ear problem and alert you to make an appointment with your veterinarian. Groomers can be a huge help to you, your veterinarian and your pet because you see your groomer every 6 to 8 weeks and your veterinarian every 6 to 12 months. An alert groomer can be an early warning system so you can get your pet to the veterinarian early so the problem does not progress and become more difficult to treat. That will keep your pet healthier and save your pocketbook in the long run.

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