

Dr Adam Gordon - Maroubra Veterinary Hospital

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EAR INFECTIONS

As we head into the warmer months of the year we can expect to see an increase in the number of dogs presenting to us with ear infections (or otitis externa, to use the technical term). Ear infections account for about 15% of visits to our hospital in spring and summer. The reported prevalence of ear infections in dogs ranges from 10–20%. That is to say up to one in five dogs will experience an ear infection.

Unfortunately, there are a number of misconceptions relating to the management and prevention of ear infections. Incorrect management may result in an increased incidence of infections or worsening of infection in affected dogs.

So why do dogs get ear infections? There are a number of factors that contribute to ear infections in dogs. Correct identification and management of these factors is essential to the successful management of ear infections. Every patient is different, so there is no “one size fits all” strategy for treating infections. In some patients, infections can be extremely difficult to treat and eradicate. In some of these frustrating cases surgical procedures may be required as part of the management.

When dealing with ear infections, the first thing we vets do is try and identify what we call primary factors which may be causing the infection. Primary factors would include foreign bodies in the ear canal, skin allergies (due to airborne allergens or food allergy), ear mites and certain hormonal diseases.

Ear mites and foreign bodies can usually be identified and managed at the initial visit to the veterinarian. Identifying allergies is a more time-consuming process, and would involve dietary trials and allergy testing.

After we have considered possible primary factors in ear infection, we would then consider what we call perpetuating factors. Most of the dogs presenting to us with ear infections have perpetuating factors that we can identify. The most common one is conformational factors, such as narrowed ear canals (due to previous infections and scarring), hairy ear canals, and the big one — pendulous ears.

Breeds with pendulous ears include Cocker Spaniels — the top breed when it comes to ear infections — Golden Retrievers and Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. In these breeds, the ear flap hangs over the ear canal, resulting in a humid, poorly ventilated ear canal, a perfect environment for bacteria and yeasts to thrive in.

Excess moisture in the ear canal is another predisposing factor. We see this in dogs that swim regularly or get water in the ears at bath time. The other cause of ear canal moisture is weather conditions. The humid summers we get in Sydney contribute to increased incidence of ear infections, especially with yeasts. We all know how much yeasts like moist, dark environments!

Once we have a handle on which factors may be playing a part in the infection, we can move on to appropriate treatment. When I see an infected ear, after addressing the above-mentioned factors, the first two things I want to do are clean the ear effectively and take some samples from the ear to identify which infectious agents are involved.

Taking samples from the ear for microscopic examination is quick, inexpensive, and an important part of treating ear infections. This allows us to determine if the infection is due to yeasts, mites, bacteria, or a combination of these. Depending on what we find, it may be necessary to take another ear swab to be sent to a laboratory for culture of the organism and identification of which antibiotics would be appropriate for treatment.

The three important aspects of treatment are cleaning, medications effective against the bacteria or yeast, and controlling inflammation.


Initial cleaning of the ear canal can be difficult in the conscious dog, as the ear will usually be quite painful. With some patients we will need to sedate or anaesthetise to perform cleaning. Initial cleaning will involve the use of medicated wipes and or ear flushing. In most cases I like to use medicated wipes containing acetic acid and boric acid.

Your veterinarian can show you how to continue cleaning at home. Different vets will have their own preferences on what to use as a flushing solution. There are commercially available solutions that are suitable. Alternatively saline, or a 50% white vinegar-50% water solution can be used. Your vet can show you how to perform a thorough ear flush and clean.

It is essential that the ear canal is clean and dry before applying topical ear treatments. The presence of pus and debris in the canal will stop topical treatments from working. It is also very important to note that over-cleaning can also be damaging, and can be a perpetuating factor in ear infections. While every case will be different, (and your vet will steer you in the right direction), a typical cleaning protocol might be to clean twice a day for three to five days, then 2–3 times a week. Once the infection is controlled, cleaning may only be necessary once every one to two weeks.

One more thing about ear cleaning. **DO NOT STICK COTTON BUDS DOWN YOUR DOG'S EAR CANAL!** This may push debris further down the canal so it becomes impacted against the eardrum, potentially resulting in rupture of the eardrum.

Once the ear canal is nice and clean, 3–4 drops of the ear ointment your vet has given you should be put in the ear twice daily. Correct duration of treatment is important. The rule of thumb is to treat for at least three days past the point where the infection is cured. It is not uncommon to require two to three weeks of treatment. Stopping treatment too soon is a common cause of failure to resolve infections.

A final tip for owners of dogs with floppy ears that are prone to ear infections. If he or she will allow it, use a soft hair clip or scrunchy and peg the ears back to each other for an hour or so twice daily. This will improve ventilation and reduce humidity in the ear canal, resulting in a reduced susceptibility to recurrent ear infections. 



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Care for cats who would be prone to sunburn and skin cancer. Can people use sunblock and if so what kind?

Ahhh... summer is on its way (finally!), and we are all looking forward to feeling the sunshine on our faces... but not so much those of us with pale skin. We are lucky to live in such a warm and sunny climate, but with the stronger sunlight and thinner ozone layer here in Australia we need to be careful not to overdo it. Cats can also suffer as a result of exposure to UV rays, particularly those with unpigmented areas on their faces and ears.

A thick fur coat and skin pigment provide very good protection from the sun's harmful rays, so those who lack these are vulnerable to sunburn, solar dermatitis, and possibly even skin cancer. Of course, white cats and the hairless breeds like the Sphynx are the obvious ones who need protection, but many people don't realise that cats who are mostly pigmented can still be vulnerable to sun damage, if they lack pigment on areas of the skin that have sparser hair. The ears and nose are the most common regions affected, but we can also occasionally see sunburn on the eyelids or around the mouth. Cats with sparse haircoats may develop sunburn anywhere.

Sunburn itself is obviously an uncomfortable condition, but the real problem is that cats can go on to develop solar dermatitis, and then squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), a malignant cancer.

Prevention is better than cure, and there are a few ways to help avoid sun damage to your cat. They are similar to the methods we use ourselves – a sort of cat version of slip/slop/slap. Most cats wouldn't tolerate wearing a hat or a long shirt, so ensuring your cat is in the shade during the hottest parts of the day is important – ie keep Puss indoors from 10am-4pm in summertime, and 11am-3pm in the colder months. Windows do not provide a barrier against UV rays, so if your cat likes to sun itself indoors, you may need to ensure that blinds are down or curtains are across in rooms where sun can stream in.

Sunscreens are another good preventative measure, but care needs to be taken with the sunblock used. There are sunscreens that are specially made for animals, so get a sunblock that is made specifically for cats. It used to be said that you could use a sunscreen made for babies, but this not necessarily the case anymore, as it will depend on the ingredients. Cats keep themselves very clean by grooming their coat, and this leads to some ingestion of any product that is applied to their fur or skin. Many sunscreens have ingredients that are highly toxic to cats, including aspirin-type components, so by using a product specifically made for cats you avoid these complications. Get into the habit of applying sunscreen to your cat each morning on the ears and nose, and if there is going to be prolonged exposure to the sun, then as with people, you will need to reapply the cream every two hours.

If a cat does have chronic exposure to the sun, then over time the individual episodes of sunburn will coalesce, and there will be permanent damage to the skin (solar dermatitis). This is not a cancerous condition, but can then lead on to SCC. This tends to look like scabby, thickened skin, but early cancer may have a similar appearance. Solar dermatitis can be treated medically, but if there is any doubt as to whether there may be cancerous changes, then it is strongly recommended to get a biopsy taken of the affected site to be sure of the diagnosis. Squamous cell carcinoma mostly tends to be a locally invasive type of cancer and rarely causes secondary tumours, but it is ideal to check for spread (ie metastases), by having xrays of the chest and the local lymph nodes assessed. The best treatment option for these is surgery to remove all the affected tissue with a good margin, to



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ensure all the cancer has been excised. This is a relatively 'easy' surgery when the ear tips are affected, and once the hair grows back the changes can be quite subtle. Even when the whole ear pinna requires removal, it tends to be a good long-term solution and cats can look very cute and teddy bear-like. Noses can be a bit more problematic, but surgery is still a common recommendation, and again, once healing is complete the functional and cosmetic effect is usually acceptable. Other treatment options can be considered in certain circumstances, like cryosurgery (freezing), radiation therapy, and even chemotherapy. ^{UA}

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Bird & Exotics Veterinarian, Green Square.
 Alex graduated from the University of Sydney in 1991. He achieved Membership of the Avian Health Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in 1996. In November 1996 he opened the first and only Sydney all bird and exotic pet practice. The Clinic moved to 1 Hunter St, Waterloo in 2003 and sees approximately 80% birds, and 20% fish, reptiles and other exotic pets. Alex is the current President of the Australian Veterinary Association Avian Group.
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Dear Dr Alex,

I have a 2 year old cockatiel called Spike. He only eats cockatiel seed mix, and I have been told that he should eat a pelleted food, as seed is not a balanced whole diet. If this is true how do I change him over to pelleted food?

Marie M, Sunbury, VIC

A healthy diet helps make a happy healthy bird. Too many birds, like too many people, eat high fat foods that are low in nutrition. All-seed diets, or even those that have seeds as the majority of their diet, are not balanced diets for cockatiels. Seeds, especially sunflower seeds, are high in fat with low amounts of low quality protein and low amounts of vitamins and minerals. There are now better balanced formulated pelleted or crumble foods available for cockatiels. These should make up around 80% of your bird's dry diet with vegetables, grass and native plants also being offered.

The main problem with the pelleted foods is that while they may be better for your bird, unfortunately many birds do not readily convert to the new diet. If you are lucky, they will convert easily. Some birds will switch over to pellets readily within a few days. However, others may take 4–6 weeks before conversion is achieved, so it is important to persevere and try a variety of methods. When converting your bird to pellets, you should **not** just mix the seed and pellets together, **nor** try to force your bird to eat pellets by starving them with only pellets available during conversion. Some birds will actually not eat the new diet and will starve themselves to death.

The best approach is to first remove all food at 6 pm and ensure the cage is clean of any scraps, including grit, so that just water is available overnight. The next morning, take your bird out of its cage and play with the pellets yourself on the table or floor. Pretend to eat them, crush them and move them

around in front of the bird for 5–10 minutes. If the bird begins to pick them up and is seen to crush and eat them, then conversion is complete. If the bird does not begin to eat the pellets during this time, remove the pellets and 1/2 hour later offer seed again.

If you have a non-friendly bird, you can indicate to your bird that it is feeding time either by ringing a bell or using a call (such as "foodtime"). Place seed back in with the bird for one hour – repeat this again in the evening. Continue this process for one week. After a week, replace the seed in the food container with pellets – if the bird begins to pick them up and is seen to crush and eat them, then conversion is complete. If the bird does not begin to eat after one hour, remove the pellets and after 1/2 hour offer seed again. This is the simplest approach.


Try this for a few days – if you have no success, then stop and try again in about a week's time. It is best to also gradually decrease the amount of sunflower seeds offered throughout the preceding week until there are none or almost no sunflower seeds. This will help wean your bird off its addiction to high fat seeds, so that the change to low fat pellets won't be so dramatic. Once your bird is eating pellets, you only need to have the food container 1/3 full and ensure water is plentiful. This allows your bird to crush the pellets and drop them back into the container. Your bird will then eat the crushed pellets.


After converting to pellets always remember that most birds, particularly the smaller ones such as cockatiels, still need to have small amounts of budgie seed daily (about 1/2 to one teaspoon of budgie seed).


Despite having moved to pellets, a balanced diet is still important for your bird. Not only should bird pellets or crumble be available at all times, but ideally, each day your bird should also be supplied with a selection of fresh vegetables, such as spinach, beans, parsley, broccoli, carrots, silverbeet, etc. Grass and native plants should be provided daily for all non-fruit-eating parrots, such as cockatiels. Other foods you can serve in small amounts include pasta, rice, toast, eggs, mashed potato, chicken bones and other meats. 🐣

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