Ear disease in your dog

Ear disease, sometimes called otitis by your vet, is very common in dogs. In some dogs ear disease can become an almost permanent problem and surgery may be needed in some severe cases to help reduce the symptoms.

Why does a dog get ear disease?

A dog’s ear is quite a different shape to ours. Humans simply have a horizontal tube that runs straight from the side of the head into the inner ear (auditory canal). In the dog however, the outside opening of the ear canal is high on the side of the head. The canal runs vertically down the side of the head and makes a sharp right angle into the inner ear. Additionally, some dogs have an ear flap which can partially cover the canal opening. As a result, the ear canal can become very hot and sweaty. There are a variety of things which may irritate your dog’s ear. Foreign bodies (usually grass seeds) can get stuck in the ear canal and infections may develop. There is even a type of mite which lives inside the ear canal. Often it is difficult to find the original cause of the ear disease but because your dog’s ear is itchy, he scratches at it and sets up an infection.

How do I know that my dog has ear disease?

Ear disease rarely goes unnoticed when it is severe. Your dog will probably shake his head from side to side, and may be forever stopping to sit down and scratch his ears or rub the side of his head on the ground. Sometimes a dog will shake their head so much that they burst a blood vessel and develop a swelling in their ear flap - a haematoma. If this happens your dog will probably need an operation to drain the swelling. In many types of infection there is a smelly discharge or the ear canal may be full of black wax. Sometimes, dogs with sore ears will just sit with their head tilted to one side.

Why can't my vet just prescribe some treatment over the phone?
Even if your dog has repeated problems with his ears there is no guarantee that each episode is
caused by the same thing. It is very important that your vet looks inside your dog’s ear with an
instrument called an otoscope, to check for damage deep within the ear, and to look for foreign
bodies such as grass seeds. The inside of the ear is very sensitive and many dogs will not let your vet
do this unless they have been sedated or even anaesthetised. Failure to remove a foreign body can
result in permanent damage to the ear.

How is ear disease treated?

Once ear disease starts your dog will need some treatment to stop the irritation. Treatment will vary
depending on the cause of the problem. Obviously a foreign body will have to be removed, and
specific treatment may be required for mites or nasty infections. Your vet may need to take samples
from your dog to decide which is the best treatment to give. Your vet will probably prescribe ear
drops and possibly also some tablets. However, unless the ear is clean the ear drops cannot work. It
may be necessary for your vet to admit your dog to the hospital and flush out its ear canals before
treatment starts. In less severe cases, your vet will show you how to use an ear cleaner on your dog.
Always make sure you follow your vet’s instructions carefully. You must complete the treatment
course even if the ears seem to be much better within one or two days.

I already have some ear drops - can I use those?

NO! Never put anything into your dogs ear without first consulting your vet. Even if the drops were
prescribed for your dog in the past they may do more harm than good on this occasion. Many types
of ear drop ‘go off’ once they have been opened, or it may be that the ear problem is caused by
something different this time. Remember that ear disease is very itchy and can be very painful - you
must always seek veterinary treatment sooner rather than later for the sake of your pet.

What happens if I don’t get treatment for my dog?

It is unlikely that the ear disease will get better on its own. The longer you leave it before starting
treatment the harder it becomes to clear up the irritation. Each time ear disease develops, more
damage is done and eventually the walls of the ear canal may become thickened. This makes further
infections more likely as fresh air cannot get to the bottom of the ear canal. When ear disease keeps
coming back, surgery may be needed to remove part of the wall of the ear canal so that treatment
can get to the site of infection.

Why does my dog keep getting ear problems?

Unfortunately some animals are just more prone to ear problems than others. Dogs with long dangly
ears like spaniels seem to have particular problems. This is probably because it is difficult for air to
circulate in the ear canal. The ear becomes hot and sweaty, providing the ideal breeding ground for
bugs. These types of dogs often have a lot of hair growing up the ear canal and this can become
matted with wax and ear drops making the problem worse. Dogs which spend a lot of time in water
may also get regular ear infections. The water in the ear canal allows some bugs to grow more
readily than normal. Also, dogs with allergies frequently have recurring ear problems. The lining of
the ear is like the skin on the rest of the body and can become itchy and inflamed in an allergic dog.

How can I stop my dog getting ear disease?
Unfortunately it is impossible to prevent ear disease coming back in some dogs. In fact if your dog has had one ear infection, it is highly likely that they will have repeated bouts. You should check your dog’s ears regularly and contact your vet if the ears become red or sore looking. Regular ear cleaning can be helpful in removing debris and wax within the ear, but excessive cleaning may damage the inside of the ear and make infection more likely. Unless advised otherwise by your vet, clean your dog’s ears about once a week. If your dog has hairy ear canals the hair should be plucked to allow good ventilation.

Conclusion

In most cases of ear disease the symptoms will clear up within a few days of treatment starting. Unfortunately this is not the end of the problem. It is highly likely that the problem will come back at some stage in the future and you should be on your guard for it. If the problem recurs, seek advice from your vet as soon as possible because if the disease is allowed to go untreated for any length of time, permanent damage may result.