

EAR INFECTIONS IN DOGS

How common are ear infections in dogs?

Infection of the outer ear canal (otitis externa) by bacteria or yeast, is one of the most common types of infections seen in dogs. Some breeds such as Cocker Spaniels and Miniature Poodles seem more prone to ear infections, but they may occur in any breed.

What are the symptoms of an ear infection?

A dog with an ear infection is uncomfortable; its ear canals are sensitive. It shakes its head trying to get the debris and fluid out, and it scratches its ears. The ears often become red and inflamed and develop an offensive odor. A black or yellowish discharge commonly occurs.

Don't these symptoms usually suggest ear mites?

Ear mites can cause several of these symptoms, including a black discharge, scratching, and head shaking. However, ear mite infections generally occur most commonly in puppies. Ear mites in adult dogs occur most frequently after a puppy carrying mites is introduced into the household.

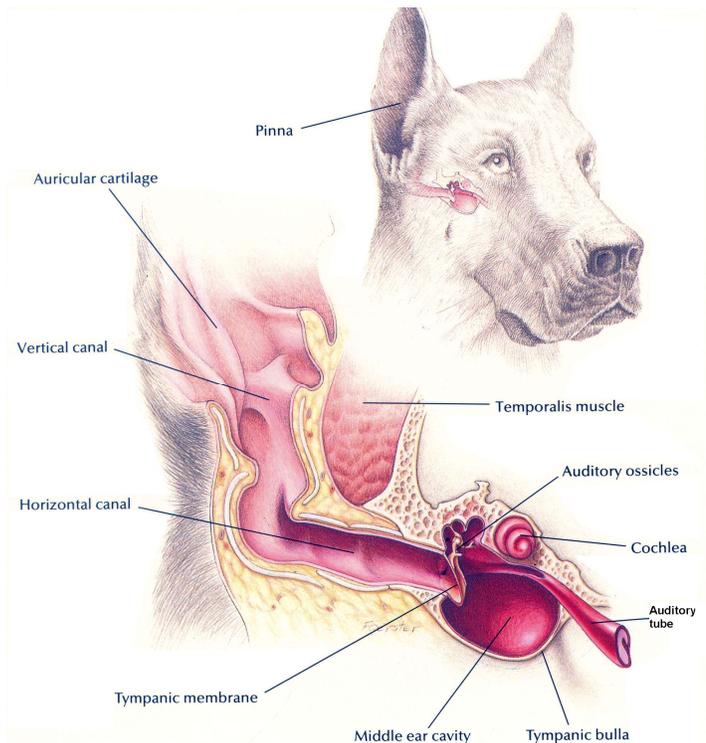
Since these symptoms are similar and usually mean an infection, can I just come by and get some medication?

There are several kinds of bacteria and at least one type of fungus, which might cause an ear infection. Without knowing the kind of infection present, we do not know which drug to use. In some cases, a foreign body or tumor in the ear canal may cause the ear infection. Treatment with medication alone will not resolve these problems. Also, the dog must be examined to be sure that the eardrum is intact.

How do you find out which drug to use?

First, the ear canal is examined with an otoscope. This permits a good view of the ear canal. This examination allows us to determine whether the eardrum is intact and if there is any foreign material in the canal. When a dog is in extreme pain and refuses to allow the examination, it must sometimes be completed under sedation or anesthesia.

The next step is to examine a sample of the material from the ear canal to determine which organism is causing the infection. This is called cytology. Examination of that material under



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the microscope is very important in helping the veterinarian choose the right medication to treat the inflamed ear canal.

How are ear infections treated?

The results of the otoscopic examination and cytology tell us what to do. If there is a foreign body or tick lodged in the ear canal, the dog is sedated so that it can be removed. As stated previously, some dogs have such a heavy buildup of debris that sedation is needed to cleanse the canal and examine it completely.

Cytology exam of debris from the ear canal dictates which drug to use. Sometimes, it reveals the presence of more than one type of infection (i.e., a bacterium and a fungus, or two kinds of bacteria); this situation usually requires the use of multiple medications or a broad-spectrum medication.

An important part of the evaluation of the patient is the identification of underlying disease. Many dogs with chronic or recurrent ear infections have allergy problems or low thyroid function (hypothyroidism). If underlying disease is found, it must be diagnosed and treated, if at all possible. If this cannot be done, the dog is less likely to have a favorable response to treatment. Also, the dog might respond temporarily, but the infection will relapse at a later time (usually when ear medication is discontinued).

How important is it to treat an ear infection?

Dogs with ear infections are miserable. Their ears are a source of constant pain resulting in head shaking and scratching. However, that is not the only problem. Head shaking and scratching can also cause broken blood vessels in the earflap, requiring surgery, and chronic ear infections can penetrate the eardrum and result in an internal ear infection.

My dog's ear canal is nearly closed. Is that a problem?

Narrowing of the ear canal is another result of a chronic ear infection. There are medications that can shrink the swollen tissues and open the canal in some dogs. However, some cases will eventually require surgery.

What is the purpose of surgery?

The surgery for a narrowed ear canal is called a lateral ear resection. Its purpose is to remove the vertical part of the ear canal.

What can be done if the ear canals are completely closed?

The most severe consequence of a chronic ear infection is total closure and hardening of the ear canal. When this occurs, the lateral ear resection will no longer be helpful. The appropriate surgery for this situation is ear canal obliteration. The entire ear canal is surgically removed. Since severe scarring and calcification occur, this can be a lengthy surgical procedure and can result in facial nerve damage.