

Ask A Vet: Do Itchy Ears Have Your Dog Scratching His Head

Sunday, April 24, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My Labrador has been getting ear infections chronically for the last couple years. I get an ointment from my vet that seems to clear it up, but it seems to keep coming back every few months. Is there anything I can do to prevent this?

Dear Reader,

Canine Ear infections otherwise known as "Otitis Externa" are one of the most common issues veterinarians face. In fact, it is estimated that around 20% of dogs deal with ear infections regularly. They are often stubborn to get rid of, and recur with great frequency. They can also be very painful for the dog and incredibly annoying to the sympathetic owner.

Successfully dealing with and preventing otitis externa in your dog depends on obtaining the correct diagnosis. The most common signs to notice at home are head shaking, scratching, redness, or a foul smelling discharge from the ear canal. If you notice these or other signs, it is important to see your veterinarian. He or she can then use a microscope to determine what type of infection it is so the appropriate treatment can be done right away.

The most common types of ear infections in dogs are fungal(yeast) and bacterial. Occasionally dogs can also develop ear mite infestations but this only makes up about 10% of cases. Treating these infections is fairly simple in most cases with either a topical or oral antibiotic or antifungal. Anti-inflammatories are also used in many cases to combat pain and swelling. The tricky part is to determine why the ear infection developed in the first place. Typically there is a predisposing cause that allowed the ear to become infected. Allergies to either food or particles in the environment are the most common predisposing cause. Veterinarians often use allergy testing or hypoallergenic food trials to diagnose these allergies. Humidity in the air or moisture from bathing or swimming can also play a role in allowing infections to arise. Certain breeds such as Cocker Spaniels, Labradors, Springer Spaniels and Bulldogs may even have anatomical features that can predispose them to ear infections.

If your dog suffers from ear infections it is imperative that you clean the ears properly on a regular basis. Consult your veterinarian about the best type of cleaner to use and the proper method for cleaning them. If cleaning alone does not control the problem have your dog seen as soon as possible. Canine ear infections are frustrating, but when a proper diagnosis and cause is found they can be controlled.

-Dr. Justin Sellon