

Ask A Vet: Dog's Ear Infection May Go Deeper Than You Think

Sunday, February 16, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My Cocker Spaniel has been dealing with ongoing ear infections for two or three years. I know they can have ear problems, but this seems excessive. What could be causing so many infections and how can I prevent them?

Dear Reader,

Chronic canine ear infections are more common than you think and are truly one of the most frustrating issues we as veterinarians face. It is estimated that about 20% of dogs deal with ear infections multiple times throughout their lives. Not only are they painful, itchy, and irritating for the dog, but it is very difficult for their owners to watch them in such discomfort. The reason many ear infections become chronic is that their underlying cause has not been identified. Finding this underlying cause is often the challenge in successfully treating canine ear infections.

These "underlying factors" are what makes the otherwise normal ear prone to getting infected. Some common factors are allergies (both food and environmental), ear mites, mange mites, external environment (humidity, moisture, dirt), small ear canals, and even low thyroid hormone levels. If a dog has one of these issues it can create perfect conditions within the ear for yeast or bacterial infection to take hold. Once the infection has started these conditions will only worsen inviting the downward spiral of chronic ear problems. Since chronic ear infections often consist of multiple issues, treating them requires a multi-pronged approach. First, the primary organism causing the infection needs to be identified. Your veterinarian can run a simple cytology test to gain this information. Most of the time this is either yeast or bacteria, which can typically be killed with the proper medication. Often anti-inflammatories are also used to help with the itching and pain associated with the infection. Aside from the use of prescription medications, cleaning the ears on a regular schedule is also important. Material such as excess wax and pus will make it impossible for the ears to dry out and get in the way of topical medications that need to get all the way down the ear canal. However, dogs often resent having their ears cleaned and because of this it may be the most overlooked part of treatment. Finally, as eluded to previously, finding an underlying factor is the key to preventing the infection from returning. Maybe your dog is allergic to his food, swims in a nearby creek or pond, or suffers from low thyroid hormone? Cooperating with your veterinarian will hopefully solve the mystery and lead your dog to a long term solution to his ear problems.

-Dr. Justin Sellon