

Itchy, Inflamed Ears? Don't Make These Common Mistakes

There are a lot of misconceptions among pet parents about what causes itchy, inflamed and infected ears, and how best to deal with them. These two common mistakes can actually make the situation worse. Know your best course of action for your pet's safety and comfort.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Otitis externa, which is the medical term for inflammation or infection of the outer ear canal, is a common problem in dogs
- It's important to separate fact from fiction about canine ear infections, for example, they're not contagious, and they frequently recur in predisposed dogs
- Prevention is the best cure for your dog's ear infections, which means keeping his ears clean daily and cleaning them as often as necessary
- Cases of otitis externa that do not respond to conventional medications may be successfully treated with natural remedies
- The best method for cleaning most dogs' ears is to saturate a cotton ball with cleaning solution and swab out the inside of the ear

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Unfortunately, recurring ear problems are very common in dogs. Otitis externa is the medical term for inflammation or infection of the outer canal of the ear, and some dogs are more prone to the condition than others. To make matters worse, there are apparently a lot of misconceptions among dog parents about what causes itchy, inflamed, infected ears, and how best to deal with them. Veterinary journal dvm360 addressed several of them.

5 Facts vs. Fiction About Canine Ear Infections

1. **Fiction** — "All ear infections are the same, so I can use the same medicine that worked the last time."

Fact — Ear infections are caused by a variety of different organisms, and it's very important to find out the precise pathogen involved in order to successfully treat the problem. Fungal infections are treated very differently than bacterial infections. In dogs with recurring ear infections, it's also important that your veterinarian determine if the problem is new or an old unresolved infection.

2. **Fiction** — "If I pluck the hairs out of my dog's ears, my dog will never get another ear infection."

Fact — Ear hair has a purpose, so unless it's causing a problem or is aggravating an existing infection, it's not a good idea to remove it, and especially not by plucking. Plucking itself can cause irritation and inflammation.

3. **Fiction** — "My dog has an ear infection because he caught it from another animal."

Fact — Ear infections aren't contagious. They occur secondary to an inflammatory process typically caused by allergies, moisture in the ear or wax buildup. Changes to the environment in the ear can set the stage for a bacterial or yeast infection.

4. **Fiction** — "My dog scratches, licks or chews because he's bored, grooming himself or imitating the family cat."

Fact — Dogs almost never scratch continuously for any reason other than because they're itchy. If your dog is scratching, licking, biting and chewing at himself, he's itchy and it's probably an allergy that's making him miserable. But not always! Many allergic dogs are predisposed to itchy, inflamed ears, so make an appointment with your vet to find the cause of your pet's discomfort.

5. **Fiction** — "My dog's ears will be cured so he'll never get another infection."

Fact — If your four-legged family member is predisposed to ear infections, prevention is actually the only permanent "cure." If you don't take steps to manage the root cause of the problem, the two of you will be dealing with her miserable ear infections intermittently throughout her life.

Preventing Ear Infections

As mentioned earlier, some dogs are much more prone to ear infections than others. If your pet is one of the unlucky ones, make sure to check his ears daily or every other day at a minimum. It's wax, moisture or other debris collected in the outer ear canal that invites infection.

The solution is simple, but you must do it religiously: Clean your pet's ears when they're dirty. If his ears collect a lot of wax every day, they need to be cleaned every day. If his ears don't produce much wax or other crud, you can clean them less often, but you should still check them every day and take action as soon as you see the ear canal isn't 100% clean and dry.

If you think your dog might already have an ear infection, it's important to make an appointment with your veterinarian before you begin a cleaning regimen. In many cases an infection leads to rupture of the eardrum, which requires special cleaning solutions and medications. For healthy **canine ears**, some of the best cleaning agents are:

- Witch hazel
- Organic apple cider vinegar mixed with an equal amount of purified water
- Hydrogen peroxide, a few drops on a cotton round dabbed in coconut oil
- Green tea or calendula infusion (using tea that has been cooled)
- One drop of tea tree oil mixed with 1 tablespoon coconut oil (for dogs only — never cats)
- Colloidal silver

Please NEVER use rubbing alcohol to clean your dog's ears! It can cause burning and irritation, especially if the skin is inflamed. Use cotton balls or cotton rounds ONLY to clean the inside of the ear canal. You can use cotton swabs to clean the outer area of the ear, but never inside the canal, as they can damage your dog's eardrums.

The best method for cleaning most dogs' ears is to saturate a cotton ball with cleaning solution and swab out the inside of the ear. Use as many cotton balls as necessary to remove all the dirt and debris. Another approach is to squirt a small amount of solution directly into the ear, then follow with cotton balls to wipe the ears clean. However, this method may make your dog shake her head wildly, drenching you in ear cleaning solution!

All-Natural Treatments for Bacterial Ear Infections

Culture test results indicate that an increasing number of canine ear infections are caused by bacteria that are resistant to most antibiotics. These are cases for which alternative therapies can provide highly effective, nontoxic relief. One example: A 2016 study tested the effectiveness of manuka honey to treat bacterial ear infections in 15 dogs.¹

Researchers applied 1 milliliter (mL) of medical grade honey in the dogs' ears for 21 days. The results showed the honey "promoted rapid clinical progress," with 70% of the dogs achieving a "clinical cure" between seven and 14 days, and 90% by day 21. In addition, the bacteria-killing activity of the honey worked against all bacteria species tested, including multiple strains of drug-resistant bacteria.

It's important to note that it doesn't appear the antimicrobial activity of honey is enough on its own to resolve every ear infection. Most of the dogs in the study had complete symptom relief by day 21; however, several still had bacterial infections. Another remedy for resistant ear infections that's receiving a lot of attention is medicinal clay. Green clay has been shown to effectively treat a variety of bacteria that have been implicated in chronic ear infections, including pseudomonas and MRSA.²

Sources and References

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¹ [Vet Dermatol. 2016 Apr;27\(2\):93-8e27](#)

² [Sci Rep. 2016 Jan 8;6:19043](#)
