

Foxtails Can Be Fatal – Keep Your Dog Away

Their odd shape means they only travel one direction — deep to the internal organs and fast. They hide from X-rays, carry bacteria, cause abscesses. Can be tragic or spark serious vet bills involving surgeries. Don't play Russian roulette. Get this new type of protective gear today.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Foxtail season has arrived (depending on where you live); these plant awns have little appendages with spikes and sharp edges designed to attach like glue to passersby
- Foxtails can invade your pet's body through any opening, and once inside they can create abscesses, damage tissue, cause infection and can be lethal
- If you think your dog may have been exposed, check him from nose to tail as often as necessary and remove any foxtails in his coat or between his toes
- If you suspect a foxtail has made its way into your dog's nose or throat or ear, or you see an oozing sore or draining tract, get him to a veterinarian or emergency animal clinic right away
- If possible, avoid taking your pet where she may be exposed to foxtails, or consider investing in a specially designed hoodie

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Summer is on the way, which means that depending on where you live, you may be dealing with an abundance of dried foxtail plants. Especially if you're in the western half of the U.S. and had a rain-soaked winter, it's heads up time to protect your pets from these treacherous little plant awns.

Both dogs and cats who roam outdoors can be exposed to foxtails, however, cats tend to dislodge them while grooming. They're most commonly seen in long-haired dogs.

The 411 on Foxtails

As you've probably guessed, foxtails resemble a fox's tail, especially as they dry out in the sunshine and warm weather of the spring and summer months, changing from green to light brown. They have hairy-looking little appendages with spikes and sharp edges designed to attach securely to whatever or whoever happens by so they can spread their seeds to surrounding areas.

Foxtails are pervasive throughout California, have been reported in almost every state west of the Mississippi and are spreading to the east coast of the U.S. as well.

There are several varieties, both native and non-native, but only some have harmful spurs. One dangerous variety is foxtail barley, which is found across the U.S. except in the south Atlantic and Gulf Coast states, and also grows throughout Canada and in parts of Mexico.



Foxtail barley

Other harmful varieties include the giant foxtail, cheatgrass and **ripgut brome**.



Giant foxtail



Golden cheatgrass

California is expecting a challenging foxtail season thanks to a record wet winter. In recent years, Midwestern states have seen a sharp increase in foxtail-related infections in dogs, especially sporting and hunting dogs who run through thick brush where they can inhale or swallow foxtails.

The takeaway here is that if you live where foxtails grow, you and your dog (or cat) can encounter them in parks, open fields, on city sidewalks and even in your own backyard.

Why You Absolutely Need to Protect Your Pet from Plant Awns

In late spring and early summer, foxtail plant heads turn brown and dry and disperse across the landscape. Their tiny spikes cause them to burrow into soil, and wildlife also helps spread them around.

Virtually any exposure your dog has to grass awns is hazardous. They make their way into the nose, eyes, ears, mouth and just about every other opening of dogs' bodies, including the vulva and penis. They can get deep into your dog's nostril or ear canal or under the skin in no time, and often so fast you don't notice them.

These deadly little plant heads can burrow into your dog's fur and pierce the skin, often between the toes, and once in, they can only move forward. They can end up virtually anywhere in your pet's body, and symptoms depend on where the foxtail is located. For example, if your dog is shaking his head, there could be a foxtail in an ear canal. If he's suddenly sneezing uncontrollably, he could have one in his nose. Foxtails in the lungs can cause coughing and difficulty breathing.

A dog's body isn't capable of processing foxtails and can neither degrade nor decompose them. To make matters worse, they carry bacteria. Unless they're found early, they can continue to travel throughout the body, creating abscesses, damaging tissue and causing grass awn disease.

A grass awn infection can be very difficult to diagnose, in part because the infection occurs behind the forward-moving foxtail. In addition, foxtails are hard to see using traditional imaging techniques, because they are small, covered with infection and scar tissue, and are invisible on X-rays.

As you can probably imagine, once a foxtail is roaming around inside your dog's body, it can be incredibly difficult to find. It's not uncommon for veterinarians to perform multiple surgeries before a foxtail is finally located and removed.

Signs Your Pet Has Had an Encounter with Foxtails

If a foxtail made its way into your dog's nose, signs are pawing at the nose and nasal drainage or infection. Foxtails that imbed in the skin typically cause inflammation, redness, irritation and oozing sores. Other signs can include:

- Draining tracts (openings in the skin from which discharge drains)
- Excessive licking (especially the paws)
- Lethargy
- Squinting
- Scratching
- Depression
- Head shaking
- Chewing
- Loss of appetite

If a foxtail travels to the abdominal cavity, there can be fever and abdominal pain. Foxtails lodged in the vagina or urethra can cause pain and difficulty urinating.

If you see foxtails in your dog's coat or anywhere on the outside of her body, including between her toes, remove them immediately either by hand or with a brush. However, if you suspect there's a plant awn in your dog's nose or another body opening, or if you see an oozing sore or drainage tract, you need to take your dog to your veterinarian for removal.

Because foxtails and other types of plant awns have spikes or hooks that dig into whatever surface they attach to, when they embed in tissue, they're often very tricky to remove because they can break apart, leaving a portion of the awn behind.

Not only does the remaining piece of the foxtail continue to cause inflammation and infection at the entry site, but it typically moves forward and deeper into the skin. It can migrate throughout the body, ending up almost anywhere, including the lungs, abdominal organs, spinal cord — even the brain.

How to Keep Your Furry Family Member Foxtail-Free

One of the biggest hurdles in keeping your pet safe from foxtails is learning to identify them. They're usually a golden-brown color, but depending on the variety they can be green, white, yellow or dark brown, and can vary in size from about a 1/2 inch to 3 inches in length, and 1/8th to a 1/2 inch in diameter.

To acquaint yourself with foxtails and other dangerous plants where you live or travel with your dog, you can search the database at **[Center for Invasive Species and Ecosystem Health](#)** to see images of plants that grow in your area.

Obviously, avoiding foxtail exposure altogether should be the goal, but that's not always possible. If your dog does encounter foxtails, it's important to carefully comb through his coat, and also check his ears, mouth, nose and between his toes a few times each day to remove any that you find before they have an opportunity to invade his body.

If your dog has a long coat and spends a lot of time outdoors, consider trimming (not shaving) his coat during the warmer months, and don't forget the hair between his toes and pads. You might also want to check into these safety devices other dog owners have created to keep their canine companions free of foxtails:

- OutFox Field Guard
- Foxtailfree Hoodies
- Foxtail Dog Protector

Sources and References

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