

Why Is Your Dog Doing the Head Shake Dance?

Head shaking is more than a simple reflex — it's your dog's way of signaling distress. By remaining observant, you can safeguard your companion's ear health and overall comfort.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Occasional head shaking is normal, but persistent or forceful shaking often signals ear discomfort, irritation, or an underlying health problem requiring veterinary attention
- Common causes include earwax buildup, trapped water, ear infections, allergies, parasites, and foreign objects. Each condition requires timely intervention to prevent worsening discomfort or secondary complications
- Warning signs include redness, swelling, foul odor, discharge, or pain when the ear is touched. Immediate veterinary care can prevent hearing loss or ear damage
- Preventive strategies include regular ear cleaning with vet-approved solutions, drying ears after water exposure, parasite prevention, and monitoring for seasonal or food-related allergies
- Protecting your dog's ear health safeguards comfort, prevents chronic pain, and ensures long-term well-being. Consistent observation and early veterinary care are essential to maintaining optimal ear function

Most pet parents have witnessed their dog suddenly shaking their head back and forth. While the occasional shake is often harmless, such as after waking from a nap, bathing, or swimming, persistent or forceful head shaking is a sign that something is wrong.

Dogs cannot use their paws to reach deep into their ears, so head shaking becomes their natural way of relieving discomfort or trying to remove irritants. When the behavior becomes frequent, however, it could indicate that you need to bring your pet to the vet for proper evaluation.

Why Do Dogs Shake Their Heads?

Head shaking serves a functional purpose. It helps dogs dislodge water, dust, or small particles from their ears and provides temporary relief from itchiness. However, when the shaking persists beyond a few minutes, it indicates that the irritation is ongoing and unlikely to resolve without intervention.

Ignoring repeated head shaking may allow a minor issue, such as wax buildup, to progress into more serious conditions like infections or hematomas (a burst blood vessel that leads to a swollen ear flap). Understanding the potential causes is essential for timely care. Below are some common reasons why your dog shakes their head.¹

Earwax Buildup

Dogs naturally produce earwax, which plays an important role in protecting the ear canal. In a normal ear the wax will be barely noticeable. You may see a minimal amount of yellow material in the ear, but nothing more and the ear should be a pale pink. If there is excessive buildup, however, this can lead to itching, irritation, and head shaking. If your pet frequently scratches or rubs their ears while tilting their head to one side, it could be a sign of excessive earwax buildup or an ear infection. You can also take a peek inside their ears — look for dark, thick, or foul-smelling wax.

Routine ear cleaning with a veterinarian-approved ear solution or a safe natural cleaner such as witch hazel can manage this condition effectively. You can use cotton balls or pads, but don't use cotton swabs, as they risk pushing wax deeper into the canal.

Water in the Ears

If your dog loves the water, know that one common risk with this activity is that water can get lodged inside their ears, which causes discomfort and can sometimes result in an ear infection. It can create a tickling sensation which may cause head shaking. If your dog has floppy ears, water is more likely to get trapped and cause a moist environment which can then lead to infection if not addressed. This can occur during bathing as well. To avoid getting water in your dog's ears, make sure to:²

- Place cotton balls in their ears during bathtime (and remove them afterward).
- Use a washcloth to clean their head and face instead.
- Avoid direct spraying water onto their head and use caution if your dog is playing with the hose or sprinkler.
- Dry their ears gently with a towel after swimming or bathing or any other water activities which causes their ears to get wet.
- Clean their ears with witch hazel or an approved ear cleaning solution after bathing, swimming or playing in water.

If water remains trapped, an ear-drying solution recommended by your veterinarian may be beneficial.

Ear Infections

One of the most common medical causes of head shaking is an ear infection, often caused by bacteria or yeast. Dogs with floppy ears are particularly susceptible to this condition as moisture is more likely to get trapped in the ear or under the pinna (ear flap). Ear infection symptoms to watch for include:

- Redness and swelling
- Unpleasant odor
- Discharge (brown, yellow, white or bloody)
- Pain or resistance to ear handling
- Persistent ear scratching and head shaking

Ear infections require veterinary treatment, usually involving ear cleaning, topical medications, and sometimes oral antibiotics. Herbal therapy and cold laser therapy are also helpful. If left untreated, it can lead to chronic pain or hearing loss.

Allergies and Contact Irritation

Food ingredients, pollen, dust mites, or mold can all trigger allergies, which cause inflammation in the ears. This leads to persistent itching and secondary infections. If you notice that your dog shakes their head frequently during a particular season, it could be a sign of allergies. Other symptoms include:³

- Itchy skin
- Paw chewing
- Face rubbing
- Hair loss
- Recurrent ear infections

Your integrative vet may recommend dietary trials or allergy testing to test for food or environmental allergies that may be the underlying cause of recurrent ear infections. Treatments may involve herbal therapy, laser therapy, acupuncture or allergy medications to manage symptoms. Making sure your pet is on supplements such as probiotics, omega-3 (fish oil) and apple cider vinegar may also be helpful to boost your pet's natural resistance to infections.

Less commonly your pet may develop a contact allergy. This is an allergic reaction to topical medications, shampoos or ear cleaners. If you notice your dog suddenly shaking their head after a new product is introduced, an allergic or irritant reaction may be the cause. Stop using the product immediately to see if there are any improvements.

Parasites

If your pet has parasites in their ear, it can be another potential cause. Ear mites feed on earwax and oils, producing dark debris that resemble coffee grounds.⁴ They cause intense itching and head shaking. Meanwhile, fleas, mosquitoes or ticks may cause bites around the ears and head, resulting in irritation or infection.

There are natural strategies such as pet safe essential oils and diatomaceous earth that can help repel fleas, ticks and ear mites. Consult with your integrative vet on what will work best for your pet.

Foreign Objects in the Ear

Foreign material such as grass awns or seeds, burrs, dirt, or even small toys can become lodged in the ear canal. Dogs often respond with sudden and vigorous head shaking and ear scratching.

Removing objects at home is not recommended, as this may worsen the situation. Your veterinarian can safely remove foreign objects or debris and treat the underlying cause, although sometimes sedation may be necessary.

Neurological Conditions and Tremors

Not all abnormal head movements are due to irritation. Some dogs experience idiopathic head tremors, characterized by rhythmic bobbing or shaking that may eventually resolve on their own. Another condition is vestibulitis, where dogs develop a head tilt and may have trouble balancing. This may be due to an inner ear infection or inflammation and is more common in older dogs. Your veterinarian will be able to determine the cause.

In contrast, neurological disorders may present with tremors, a head tilt or imbalance, seizures, or difficulty walking. If any of these symptoms occur consult your veterinarian for guidance. Some neurologic conditions may require seeing a veterinary neurologist for complete evaluation.

When to Seek Veterinary Care

Occasional head shaking is not unusual, but there are times when you need to seek veterinary help, as it can point to a bigger problem. If you notice any of these in your pet, schedule a veterinary visit immediately:

- The shaking continues beyond a day or has become constant
- There is visible swelling, redness, or discharge in the ear
- The earwax is dark brown or white or contains blood or a large amount is present (healthy earwax is a light yellow and is present in small amounts)⁵
- You notice an odor coming from the ear
- Touching the ear causes pain; your dog cries out or moves away from you
- The ear flap appears swollen or thickened

To determine the cause, your vet will perform an otoscopic exam to check their ear canal and an ear cytology or even a culture if needed to determine the cause of infection. Accurate diagnosis ensures that treatment targets the root cause, rather than only addressing symptoms.⁶

Preventive Measures for Ear Health

If not addressed, and your dog repeatedly and forcefully shakes their head, it can cause their blood vessels in the ear flap to rupture, causing a painful swelling known as hematoma. If not treated properly, the ear may scar permanently into a "cauliflower ear."⁷ Hematomas are more common in dogs with floppy ears.

Prevention is the better option; the good news is there are simple strategies that will help protect your pet's ears and stop the constant head shaking. Follow these tips:

1. **Conduct routine ear cleaning** — Regular ear cleaning prevents excessive wax buildup and reduces infection risk. Follow a consistent process — apply cleaner, massage the ear base, allow the dog to shake, and gently wipe away residue. One easy cleaner is witch hazel solution or a vinegar and water mixture (do not use vinegar and water if your dog's ear is red or has any abrasions as it may burn).⁸
2. **Dry their ears after spending time in the water or after bath time** — Always dry your dog's ears after baths or swimming. For dogs that swim often, specialized drying solutions may be recommended.
3. **Parasite control** — Consider natural flea and tick preventives like pet safe essential oils.

- 4. **Allergy monitoring** — Note when symptoms flare. If they're seasonal, environmental allergies may be the cause; if consistent, it could be food allergies. Keep a symptom diary to help your veterinarian come up with a diagnosis.
- 5. **Feed a balanced, species-appropriate diet** — A balanced diet with omega-3 fatty acids supports ear and skin health, reducing inflammation and strengthening the immune system.⁹
- 6. **Use natural supplements to support your pet's ear and skin health** – Using probiotics will support your pet's normal flora and help them to resist yeast and bacterial infections. A small amount of apple cider vinegar (1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon) added to your pet's food will also help to balance the body's ph and prevent yeast overgrowth.

The Importance of Ear Health

Healthy ears are critical to your dog's comfort and overall quality of life. Persistent head shaking should never be dismissed as a harmless quirk. It is often a sign of underlying discomfort, ranging from mild irritation to more serious medical conditions.

Timely intervention protects not only hearing but also prevents chronic pain and secondary complications. As a responsible pet parent, remaining attentive to this behavior is a vital part of ensuring your dog's long-term well-being.

Sources and References

^{1,4,7} [Rover, March 11, 2025](#)
^{2,3,6} [PetMD, May 31, 2024](#)
^{5,8,9} [Animal Wellness Magazine, July 22, 2025](#)
