



Otitis Externa

What is otitis externa?

Otitis externa is the medical term for an ear infection; it is one of the most common ear issues found in household pets today. This condition is characterized by inflammation of the external ear canal and can cause great discomfort to the animal. The condition may present itself with a variety of different symptoms, including shaking of the head, scratching of the ears, and a bad odor coming from the ear canal. As the condition worsens, symptoms may elevate to swollen ears with exudate.

A frequent concern of many pet owners is ear disease. Approximately 20% of all animals brought to veterinary hospitals have otitis externa.

Inside the Ear

The two major functions of the ear are to receive auditory signals and maintain body balance. These functions can be impaired by lesions or infections anywhere within the ear. For this reason, it is important to maintain the ears of your pet!

Canine and feline ears are similar to human ears in that they are divided into three sections: the external ear, the middle ear and the inner ear. Sound waves are funneled into the canals of the external ear. These canals lead to the *tympanic membrane* (ear drum), which separates the external ear from the middle ear. The middle ear transforms the sound waves into fluid vibrations, triggering nervous impulses in the *cochlea* of the inner ear. Any disruption of this process will affect your pet's hearing and/or balance.

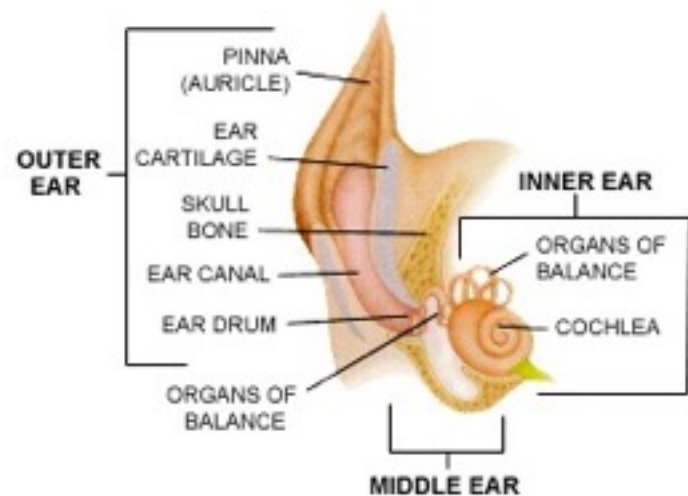


Image sourced from
Basic Pet Care Animal Hospital.

The lining of the external ear canal contains sebaceous (oil) glands, apocrine (sweat) glands and hair follicles. Secretions from these glands create ear wax. When inflammation occurs, these glands are impacted and their secretions increase greatly, possibly blocking the auditory passageway.

What causes otitis externa?

Many primary diseases result in secondary otitis externa, which causes subsequent problems for the animal. The most common causes are:

- **Atopy:** an allergy to a substance in the environment characterized by scratching, licking the paws and rubbing the face.
- **Food Allergy:** an allergy due to hypersensitivity reactions to certain foods or food ingredients.
- **Seborrhea:** an excessive or abnormal production of oil in the skin and ear canal, and the formation of greasy or dry, scaly skin.
- **Ear Mites:** parasites that commonly cause the onset of otitis externa in puppies and kittens. Once otitis externa manifests, ear mites will leave the ear canal or be destroyed by inflammation or secondary infection.
- **Foreign Bodies:** these include dirt, grass awns and loose hairs, and they are frequently responsible for otitis externa, especially in particular regions.

Why is otitis externa so common?

Dogs are more likely than cats to suffer from otitis externa. The canine ear has some distinct characteristics that lead to the increased probability of acquiring otitis externa.

- The canine ear canal is deep and curved. This allows debris, wax and excess moisture to collect.
- Certain canine breeds have ears that flap down, covering the opening of the vertical canal. Proper ventilation of the ear canal is restricted, inviting bacteria and fungi to grow. This characteristic, coupled with concurrent allergies, accounts for the majority of otitis externa cases in dogs.
- Some breeds of dog, including schnauzers, Shih tzus, and poodles have relatively more hair in their ears. This predisposes these dogs to otitis externa because the hair reduces air flow through the ears and promotes bacterial growth.

Prevention & Treatment

If your pet develops any evidence of otitis externa, an otoscopic examination by our veterinarian is recommended. To aid in the prevention of this ear disease, good general hygiene practices should be followed. These include cleaning your pet's ears on a routine basis. Regular cleaning will remove any foreign bodies, wax, purulent exudate, bacterial toxins and cellular debris from your pet's ear and promote good ear health.



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