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BONUS INSIDE!

DOES YOUR DOG HAVE RECURRING EAR INFECTIONS?

By Deva Khalsa, VMD



MOST CANINE EAR INFECTIONS ARE CAUSED BY YEAST, NOT BACTERIA, AND CONVENTIONAL TREATMENTS USUALLY RESULT IN RECURRING PROBLEMS. HERE'S WHY, AND HOW A MORE HOLISTIC APPROACH CAN YIELD BETTER RESULTS.

Ear infections are among the most common reasons dogs visit the veterinarian. Often, these infections are hardly noticeable when they first start. It's only after the dog is scratching his face and flapping his ears that his folks notice something is wrong and peek inside his ears. By then, the infection is well established. Addressing the problem promptly, and treating it naturally and over the long term, can help ensure a successful outcome without recurring infections.

YEAST IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE

Interestingly, the most common culprit when it comes to ear infections is not bacteria, but a yeast called *Malassezia*. This yeast normally lives on the skin and in the ears of our dogs. In fact, modern research is finding out that “bugs” make up a significant percentage of mammalian bodies, and that when they're in harmony, they actually perform an extremely important role in maintaining health.

We've all heard that skin is one of the first lines of defense against disease. In fact, the skin's first line of defense actually consists of a bunch of bugs. The collective group of all these bugs is called a *microbiome*. A *microbiome* is defined as the collection of microbes or microorganisms that inhabit an environment, creating a “mini-ecosystem” of symbiotic, beneficial and pathogenic bacteria (along with fungi and viruses) that call the mammalian body they inhabit “home”.

Under normal conditions, these many different types of bacteria and yeast live in balance on a dog's skin, respecting each other's boundaries – but this isn't the case when it comes to *Malassezia* (see sidebar on page 24).

Many people head back to their veterinarians a month or two after their dogs are treated for ear infections because “the infection came back”. In truth, the infection never went away. So let's find out how to successfully treat

these all-too-common ear infections in our dogs.

TREATMENT NEEDS TO START PROMPTLY AND LAST SEVERAL MONTHS

Even though the most common organism causing ear infections in dogs is a yeast, they're often conventionally treated with an ointment containing steroids, antibiotics and antifungals. This treatment lasts for two weeks at the most, with the ear infection often returning a few times a year. After months or years of this kind of treatment, the problem changes to a bacterial infection. At the bitter end, we wind up with resistant bacteria as the source of infection. This is why we have to get ear problems handled properly and completely right from the start.

We're all used to thinking that bacterial and yeast infections, when treated with appropriate conventional drugs, will simply respond and clear up uneventfully. While this may be

the case with something like a bladder infection, the ear is an ongoing science experiment. Basically, it's a petri dish where anything can grow depending on the dynamics within the ear. The ear is moist, damp and dark, and particularly ideal for yeast growth. That's why treatment has to be prolonged over several months, until a healthy balance becomes naturally maintained.

Malassezia yeast grows slowly, yet tenaciously. It can be difficult to get rid of because once it's established it's slow to recede. That's why you have to persist over time with the treatment – and be ready to act when summer comes if your dog swims in lakes or swimming pools.

A dog's ear canal is very long, unlike the human ear canal. Those

prescribed ointments typically clear up the part of the ear closest to the surface, while the yeast shelters deeper in the ear canal and grows back up the drain, so to speak, when conditions become suitable again. The deeper sections of the ear will still contain that overgrowth of *Malassezia*, which then moves back up to the more external parts of the ear canal when the conventional treatment is ended.

STABILIZING THE MICROBIOME TAKES TIME

The goal of treating a yeast infection in a dog's ear is to stabilize the microbiome – and this takes time. Killing the bacteria and yeast with a conventional ointment, as discussed above, often only results in recurring infections. Treatment has to be multipronged as well as long-term.

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LEARN TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS OF AN EAR INFECTION

Red flags to watch for are a yeasty smell from your dog's ears, and frequent scratching and head shaking. If you see nothing when you look into your dog's ears, don't assume all is well. I suggest you take a soft tissue, wrap it around your finger, and gently move it into the ear canal. If the tissue comes out with something dark brown on it, it's likely there's an excess of *Malassezia* in the ear canal. If more identification is needed, the yeast can be stained at your veterinarian's clinic and examined under a microscope.



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MALASSEZIA

– no respect for boundaries

The *Malassezia* yeast will take advantage of excess moisture and/or lipids in the area it inhabits, and will consequently overgrow and create a problem. When *Malassezia* steps over the line and goes beyond its boundaries, the result is some pretty intense itching. Thus, the dog starts shaking and scratching his head and flapping his ears.

Just like any other yeast, *Malassezia* likes to grow in moist dark areas where the “sun don’t shine”. It likes ears (where it is commonly mistaken for a dark sweet-smelling earwax), the underarms and groins, under the chin and around the anus, private parts and between the toes.

Malassezia is lipophilic, which means “having an affinity for fats or lipids”. You many have come across *Malassezia* treatment options that suggest regimens similar to those for people with candida. But nothing could be more wrong. Candida loves sugar and starch, but the *Malassezia* yeast that grows in a dog’s ears and on his skin loves lipids and couldn’t care less about starch. This yeast gets turned on when there’s excess moisture in the area and, of course, the ears are the perfect place for this to happen.



It’s only after the dog is scratching his face and flapping his ears that his folks notice something is wrong and peek inside his ears.

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Dogs with allergies often get more yeast infections in their ears, and additional *Malassezia* yeast growth on their skin, because the inflammation from the allergies increases moisture on the skin.

If the dog has allergies, getting to the root of any food sensitivities or intolerances clears them up in as natural a way as possible. My latest book, *The Allergic Pet, Holistic Solutions to End the Allergy Epidemic in Our Dogs and Cats*, has many options and solutions. I also cover solutions for allergies at allergyelimination4pets.com.

Enzyme products that kill the yeast are my favorites. Zymox makes an all-natural enzyme-based ear medication, one that contains a steroid and one that does not. I reserve the steroid-containing product for inflamed and painful ears, and use it for only a few days. It’s really important to note that any dog with a yeast infection in his ears must be treated over a few months, but not continuously. What this entails is treating both ears with Zymox once a day for seven to ten days, then for one week of every month for four to six months. This is so the microbiome in the ear can balance out, since the yeast will continue overgrowing for some time after the initial treatment.

Products containing gentian violet can also be used in the ear. *The Allergic Pet* and *Dr. Khalsa’s Natural Dog* contain recipes to make this inexpensively at home. Companies such as Liquid Health have a product called K-9 Ear Solution that contains all the ingredients. If your dog’s ears are sensitive, I recommend getting Tris-EDTA solution and adding a drop or two of gentian violet to the solution for use in the ears.

Boosting your dog’s immune system will help create the healthiest balance of bugs in his ears. A good multivitamin mix given every day can make a difference. If your dog is suffering from allergies, make sure the supplement does not contain brewer’s yeast, as this is a highly allergenic food.

Ear infections in dogs can be successfully cleared up, and you can often do it at home. What’s important to remember is that the balance of “bugs” can change due to circumstances, which means you have to be always on alert for a yeasty smell from your dog’s ears, or any signs of the onset of an infection, such as scratching and head shaking. Treatment needs to begin immediately and must be continued over a few months, not just a few days. A stitch in time saves nine visits to the veterinarian!