

# How to Clean Your Dog's Ears

When it comes to ears, there are really just two kinds of dog owners: The ones who are vaguely aware that dogs' ears are deep, dark, moist and mysterious places -- ideal sites for infections and other trouble -- and the owners whose dogs require constant ear maintenance. Both kinds of owners -- and their dogs -- would benefit from a good spring-cleaning. And not just in the spring.

"Take a few moments -- from time to time between your regular checkups with the veterinarian -- to examine your dog's ears and do a light cleaning, if necessary," advises Baltimore, MD veterinarian Estelle Ward, DVM. "If you see early signs of problems, you can head them off before they become emergencies."

## Ear Anatomy 101

Knowing where in the ear to stop and let the pros take over calls for a brief review of canine anatomy. First is the external ear, the part that protrudes from the side of the head or flops over, depending on the breed. Also considered part of the external ear is the gnarled, fleshy (and in some breeds hairy) part around the entrance to the ear canal. That's where the cleaning will start.

From the external opening, the L-shaped ear canal descends vertically before taking a 90-degree bend for a horizontal jaunt to the tympanic membrane or ear drum. Inside the eardrum is the middle ear with its three little bones that increase the force of sound vibrations and another, smaller membrane called the oval window, also a sound amplifier that leads to the inner ear.

Humans and dogs have pretty much the same equipment for hearing. Except that our ear canals go straight, more or less, to the eardrums while the dogs' take an L-shaped journey. Because you no more want to puncture your dog's eardrum than your own, restrict your cleaning efforts to the external ear canal -- the vertical part before the 90-degree bend -- and leave the rest to the veterinarian, who has special equipment and advanced training.

"It's okay to go as deep as your finger will let you into the external ear canal -- as far as you can see with a flashlight -- and gently clean with a cotton-tipped swab," Ward advises. Cotton balls or soft, cotton cloths work well around the entrance to the ear canal, and a gentle, veterinary-recommended cleaner helps the process. However, hydrogen peroxide, which is sometimes recommended, should be avoided as excess moisture is a problem. Take note of any materials in and around the ear canal, particularly excess wax. A dark wax may be a sign of ear mites, while a pus-like, foul-smelling discharge may be coming from an infection.

Infections can result from yeast or bacteria that thrive in the canals because of the near-perfect conditions: Moisture, poor air circulation, warmth, and darkness. "The number one contributor to ear problems is basic allergies," Ward observes. "The allergy can be anywhere on the skin but sometimes it is manifested and most noticeable, in the feet and in the ears.

Allergies can tip the balance in favor of bacteria or yeasts, which are already in the ear canals because they were floating around in the air. Excess water in the canals also can make trouble, says Ward. "Your dog's ears are waterproof all the way to the eardrums, just like the rest of his skin, but when a lot of water builds up in the ears, it may promote yeast growth."

## Sniff-check for Infection

A dog that scratches at its ears or appears disoriented may be pointing to an advanced ear infection, but you can get an early warning with your nose. Healthy dogs' ears should have a "pleasant" (in a doggy kind of way) smell that reminds some people of beeswax. Infected ears smell waxy, all right, but they're also disgustingly rank. In the meantime, it's a good idea to get a "base line" by sniffing your dog's ears right after the veterinarian gives him a clean bill of health.

Mites in the ears also can prompt the dog to scratch that area or shake his head violently. Not all mites cause the ears to produce excess wax, but dark brown wax could be a sign of the parasites and it only takes three or four per ear to make a mess. Ear mites are also contagious to other pets.

Whatever invades your pooch's ears -- microorganisms that cause infections, mites that are bigger but still hard to see, or plant materials -- removing them is a job for the veterinarian. Don't be surprised if he or she needs to anesthetize your dog to work deep in the ear canals; that's an area dogs are very sensitive about and you wouldn't want anyone -- human or beast -- to get hurt.

So that's it for the exam: A sniff-check and visual examination for early signs of infection, parasites, or foreign bodies; clean no farther than the external ear canal; and try to keep everything on the dry side.

"Even if you don't find problems -- and you usually won't -- working around the dog's ears is a good way to desensitize him and prepare for the time when we have to," Ward says.