

Are you listening?

Fran Cristina asks if your dog has healthy ears

Of all the species on earth the domestic dog is the one creature with the most diverse set of ears. In a room full of people pretty much everyone has the same ear; however dogs have at least five different types from the traditional canid prick ear, the large floppy ears of the Bassett Hound, the erect butterfly-shaped ears of the Papillon, to the tiny shell-like ones of Sharpei. These of course exclude the manually cropped ears of various breeds in countries which still permit cropping.

The internal structure of the dog's ear is very different to ours. From the opening against the head the ear canal travels downwards to the jaw where it makes a 45 degree turn and travels horizontally to the eardrum. (That it is why you should NEVER insert ear buds into your dog's ears).

What Can Cause Ear Infections and Problems?

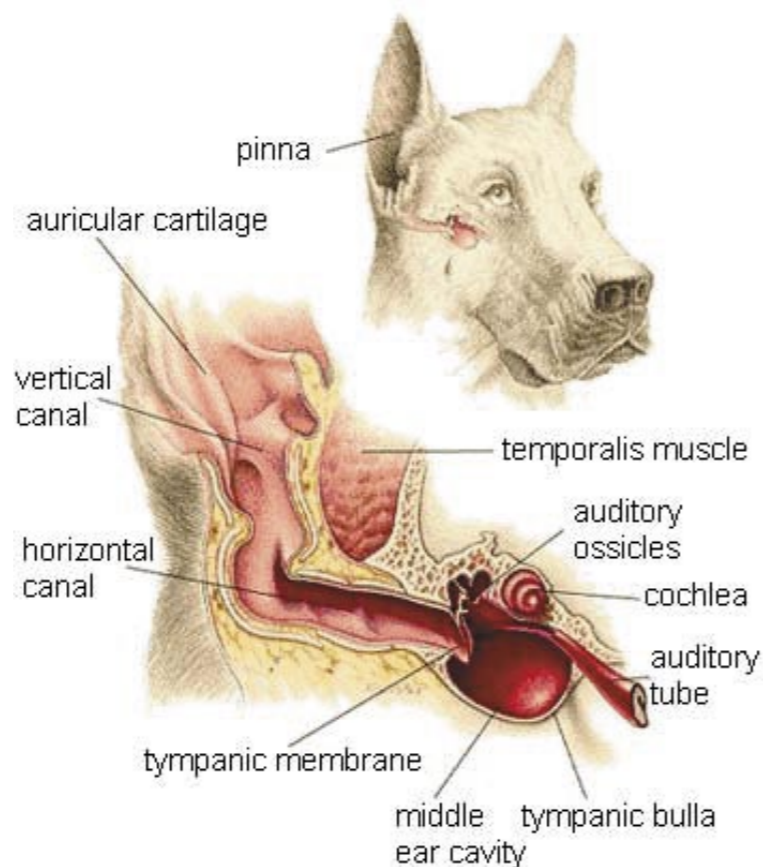
The correct name for inflammation of the ear canal is *otitis externa*. Infections can be caused by a number of factors including parasites such as ear mites, micro-organisms such as yeast, bacterial infections, foreign bodies like grass seeds, and tumours. However the major cause of ear infections is in fact a consequence of skin allergies. The ears are affected more than the rest of the skin due to the high sensitivity of the skin within the ear canal.

Ear mites are tiny parasites (really quite ugly in appearance) that happily live in the ear canal. This is their ideal living environment being dark and humid, especially in breeds with large heavy ear flaps (pinnae). Severe infestations can cause dogs to scratch at their ears and shake their heads which can result in a haematoma (a swelling in the ear flap filled with blood) which is very painful and may need surgery. Haematomas can also be due to general *otitis externa*, and it is not uncommon for them to be idiopathic (cause unknown) in many dogs. Mites can only be definitively diagnosed with a scraping from the ear examined under a microscope.

Your vet will prescribe suitable medication should he find mites present. In fact less and less mites are being seen by vets as owners use prophylactic treatments for fleas and ticks such as Frontline, Fiprotec and Advantage which discourage infestation by mites. Mites can emerge from their usual habitat

and wander around the head and neck of your dog and these spot-on treatments also rid your dogs of those unwelcome passengers.

It appears that the most common ear problem is caused by *malassezia psychodermatosis* a yeast organism which is an obligate resident in your dog's ear. However an overgrowth can occur for a variety of reasons. This overgrowth leads to a foul black exudate in the ear canal and causes the dog to constantly shake its head. Malassezia can only be identified by microscopic examination. Other bacterial infection could also be present such as *Staphylococcus* (most common) and *pseudomonas spp.*



If *malassezia* is present your vet will probably recommend ear flushing with an antimicrobial solution as well as a drying agent. This procedure is done under general anaesthetic and you will be given a topical remedy to follow up.

Breeds such as Cocker Spaniels, Poodles, and Miniature Schnauzers seem to have more than the usual problems because of large, heavy fur-covered ears (Cockers) and thick growth of hair in the ear canal (Min. Schnauzers). However with care and regular cleaning of their ears, problems can be avoided.

If your dog loves swimming, use a suitable ear cleaner to ward off 'swimmers ear'. Remember that only a vet can make a definitive diagnosis of the cause of your dog's ear irritation.

Cleaning Ears

Dogs with a history of ear infections will always require regular cleaning. Most ear cleaners will do several things

- Clean the ear canal – they usually containing a liquefying agent which dissolves the black tar-like substance

- Dries the ear canal
- Changes the PH in the ear canal. Many of the microorganisms love an environment that is alkaline, but most ear cleaners have a slightly acid base.

Always observe the golden rule – 'never put anything in your ear smaller than your elbow!'

If you clean your dogs ears always use cotton ball swabs, and never ear buds (q-tips) as you can cause any matter in the ear to be pushed further around the bend in the canal and up against the eardrum. Wipe the inside flap of the ear with a cotton ball swab soaked in ear cleaner. Never use any alcohol-based preparation – think how you would feel if someone wiped the inside of your ear with surgical spirit! Some owners think alcohol-based products will clear up these problems but they merely cause pain and discomfort.

Always utilize a product specially formulated to clean ears and carefully follow the manufacturer's recommendations.