

## Ear Problems

Ear problems are extremely common in dogs and cats, but often very frustrating to successfully treat. In almost all cases, there is an underlying problem that needs to be addressed and if that problem is not addressed, the ear problems tend to recur shortly after treatment has been discontinued. While some ear problems are due to physical and environmental causes, most are due to other primary processes, such as allergy, keratinization disorders (seborrhea), or hypothyroidism. Bacteria and yeasts are frequent complications of otitis (inflammatory ear disease), but are rarely the sole cause.

Another problem with chronic ear disease is that rupture of the eardrum (tympanum) allows microbes to travel between the external ear and the middle ear component and is the most common complication of chronic ear disease. It is therefore critical to thoroughly examine the entire ear canal as part of any evaluation of ear disease. Unlike the situation in people, it is almost impossible to navigate the vertical and horizontal ear canals of an awake animal. Anesthesia is required, since it is often painful to “scope” an animal to the level of its eardrum, as well as dangerous to move a probe that close to the eardrum in an animal that might move and cause the rupture of an otherwise intact eardrum.

As part of the evaluation of the ear canal, we anesthetize the patient and evaluate the entire system with a fiberoptic otoendoscope. We often sample material from the canal for laboratory evaluation as well. In many instances, the ear canal is also filled with debris, pus, microbes and excess wax, and we flush the system so that it is as close to clean as possible. The procedure can take as little as 20 minutes if the canals are clean, and greater than an hour if the canals need to be thoroughly flushed first to allow visualization of the ear drum.

If the eardrum is ruptured, all is not lost. If the “growth plate” for the eardrum is intact, the eardrum can regenerate, typically in 21-35 days. We do a recheck 6-8 weeks later to make sure that this has successfully occurred. Dogs aren't necessarily deaf with a ruptured eardrum, but typically sustain perhaps a 10-decibel hearing loss from the injury.

Remember that most cases of otitis have an underlying cause. Therefore, we aggressively pursue these other problems and they will be critical to successful long-term management of the situation. In cases that, for one reason or another, cannot be successfully managed medically, there are a variety of surgical options that can be explored.