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All Ears

Anatomy, basics, challenges, and grooming

Dogs' ears are different than ours. When things go wrong inside one or both ears, it's painful for them and can take longer than you might expect to address. Here's what you need to know to keep ears clean and handle any ear problems that develop, lest they end up in a chronic situation.

Spoiler alert! Sometimes we clean dogs' ears too much and accidentally do damage that increases the likelihood of ongoing ear trouble.

GOING DEEPER

While our own ear canals bend a little,

dogs' ear canals take a hard turn. They create something closer to the shape of a capital L. That difference makes keeping their ears clean and treating ear infections more challenging. Veterinarians sometimes cannot see far into the ears of breeds with particularly narrow ear canals, such as brachycephalic breeds (2.6 mm versus 5.0 mm in other dogs).

Dogs' ears go much deeper than ours, creating a more effective funnel for sound. Experts estimate they can hear about four times better than we can—especially for higher frequency sounds.

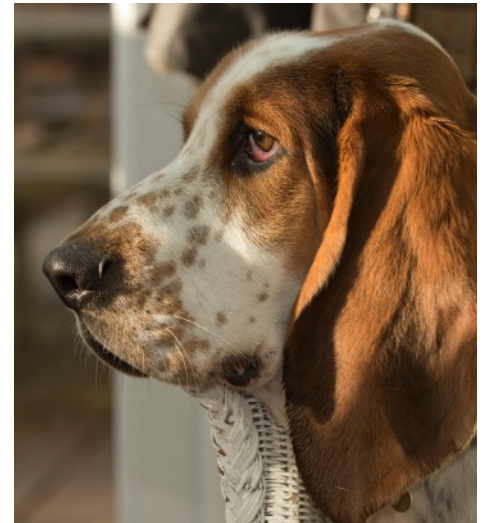
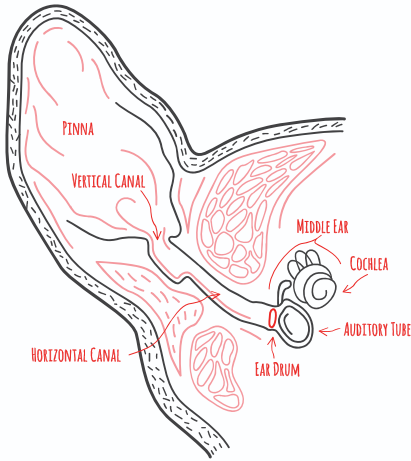
Ears do more than focus and process sound, though. They also feature

anatomical structures and nerves that affect balance and even facial movement. That's why some ear problems make dogs feel dizzy or wobbly.

INFLAMMATION AND INFECTIONS

The veterinary term for ear inflammation is otitis externa, but if the problem goes deeper into the ear, dogs can also develop otitis media and otitis interna. Such inflammation may include an actual infection or overgrowth of normal bacteria or yeast. Often, the inflammation damages the skin in the ear, and that opens the door to secondary infections.

GOOD GROOMING



Allergies, by far, remain the most common cause of ear inflammation and ear infections. However, other causes include parasites, foreign bodies, trauma, tumors, or even hormone changes.

NOTABLE RISKS

Veterinary researchers publish papers that describe breed-specific risks and relationships between ear problems and

a dog's size, ear shape or posture, and other characteristics.

In addition to any specific dog or breed prone to allergies, these breeds often end up on higher-risk lists in published studies:

- Brachycephalic breeds in general, but especially several types of Bulldogs, as well as Boxers and Pugs
- Spaniels in general, but especially

Cocker Spaniels, who have more earwax glands

- Basset Hounds
- Chinese Shar-Pei
- Beagles
- Golden Retrievers

Oddly enough, one study found a notably lower risk of ear problems in Rhodesian Ridgebacks than researchers thought, related to their body size and

Ear Cleaning

Do:

- Check your dog's ears routinely for redness, foreign bodies (like grass seeds), goop, or odor.
- Carefully dry the outer parts of the ears after swimming.
- Only use ear cleaners, medications, or other treatments recommended by your veterinarian or veterinary dermatologist.
- With cleaners, fill the ear canal without sticking the bottle tip in the canal.

Massage the base of the ear and let the dog shake out any excess. Then, gently wipe the ear flap with a soft cloth.

- With ear drops or ointments, follow the instructions about how much to put into the ear canal and massage the base of the ear.

- Sanitize the cleaner or medicine applicator tip with an alcohol-dampened cotton ball after each use.

Don't:

- Put cotton-tipped applicators or other tools inside your dog's ear canal. It could irritate or even permanently damage the skin in the ear or ear canal, push foreign bodies or gunk closer to the ear drum, or even rupture the ear drum, which is incredibly painful and dangerous.

- Don't secure floppy ears back, assuming it improves airflow in the ear. It's uncomfortable for dogs and doesn't really help.

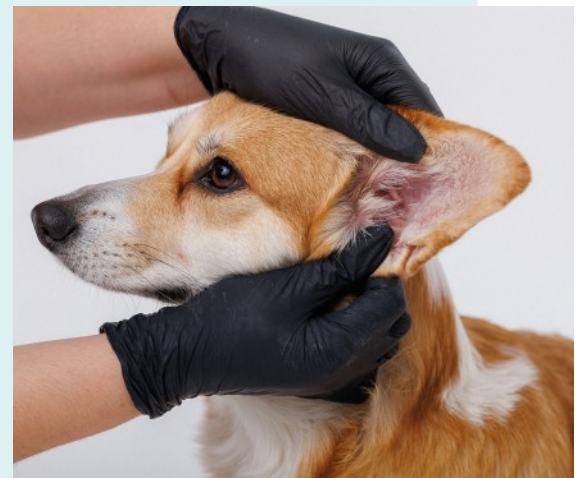


Illustration: Double Brain / Adobe Stock; Bulldog puppy: Carol J. Saunders / Alamy
Stock Photo: Bassett Hound: Nigel Cottrell / Alamy Stock Photo; Pembroke Welsh Corgi: Viktor Bondar / Alamy Stock Photo

Veterinary Care for Ear Problems

In animal health, ear problems mostly fall into the domain of veterinary dermatologists. Often, you start with your primary care veterinarian, but a referral to a specialist often follows—and that can be a good thing. It's better for your dog, and it's likely better for your relationship with your veterinary team.

When the American College of Veterinary Dermatology surveyed veterinary clients in May 2022, they found that people hit a “tipping point of frustration” after three veterinary visits for dermatology problems, including ear infections.

Some people (15%) got so frustrated that they ditched the general veterinary practice entirely, which may be harsh—ear problems often do not have a simple, single-treatment fix.

ear flap shape. Another study found lower-than-average risk for Chihuahuas, Border Collies, Yorkshire Terriers, and Jack Russell Terriers.

One UK study found that, compared to breeds with erect or semi-erect ear carriage, dogs with floppy ears had 1.76 higher odds of otitis externa, and dogs with V-shaped drop ears had 1.84 higher odds.

People often assume that dogs in hotter, damp climates or in places with larger seasonal pollen swings face a higher risk of contracting ear issues, and that may be true in some places.

For example, one study done in northwestern China found a big spike in cases June through October and especially in August and September, during their hot and rainy season. However, another localized study in Nova Scotia found no seasonal patterns at all.

So, while big data sets used in a lot of veterinary research paint a bigger picture of risks based on breed and ear



shape, your veterinarian will bring more relevant and hyperlocal expertise.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENTS

Typically, veterinarians will use an otoscope to see inside dogs' ears. They also often take a sample from inside the ear for cytology (microscopic investigation of the types of cells). As silly or strange as it seems, veterinarians sometimes sniff dogs' ears because some conditions stink!

Veterinarians may use a video otoscope (often under sedation) or may recommend an MRI or CT scan for some breeds prone to ear problems and in severe or chronic cases.

Treatments really depend on what's going on with your specific dog. They might include ear cleaning by veterinary pros, prescription ear drops or ointments to use at home or, if necessary, oral medications, including antibiotics and steroids. In some cases, veterinarians recommend a deeper inspection or deep-ear cleaning with the dog under anesthesia.

Unfortunately, some dogs require surgery for advanced or chronic ear conditions. Options include Total Ear Canal Ablation (TECA), which basically

removes the ear canal. There's also an option called a Ventral Bulla Osteotomy (BO) that removes structures in the middle ear as well. Some cases require a lateral ear canal resection (sometimes called the Zepp procedure).

One Finnish study found that onset of ear issues before the age of 1 in Cocker Spaniels “significantly increased the risk of end-stage otitis externa,” potentially requiring surgery.

That's a good reason to seek veterinary help right away if a puppy (of any breed) develops early ear problems. But your vet will obviously be your guide.

Carol Bryant, dog mom and founder of Smart Dog Copy and Fidos of Reality, has lived with and loved Cocker Spaniels for decades.

She says, “I have seen firsthand how stubborn ear issues can be,” but adds this encouragement: “Most ear infections today can be managed with improved medications, better diagnostics, and consistent ear care long before surgery becomes necessary.” **FD**

Roxanne Hawn is a journalist and an award-winning dog blogger. She is the author of Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate.