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## **Ask a Vet: The dog ears of summer**

Otitis is that inflammation of the ear canal, more common in dogs, that leads to constant scratching and head shaking and very frequently results in chronic infection. This is a very common malady seen by veterinarians all year round, but more so in the heat and humidity of summer.

Now, I have a guaranteed recipe for otitis that I'd like to share.

First, take any dog, but preferably one that loves to swim or has pendulous ears. The very long ear canals of dogs compared to humans are quite helpful for producing otitis. Next, add in a healthy dose of allergies (there are many to choose from, including food, parasite and plant pollen hypersensitivities). You may substitute another skin disorder such as seborrhea for an equal outcome. Then toss with a little fungus or bacteria -- especially those that live on the skin normally, but thrive and overgrow on warm, inflamed skin. Mix well and simmer. You'll know when your dog's ailment of otitis is ready by the redness, malodor, debris and ear flapping all day and night.

Humor aside, otitis in the dog from any cause can result in chronic pain, self-trauma and misery. Evaluation by your veterinarian is critical to halt the progression of otitis. Expect your veterinarian to do a full physical exam for the purpose of looking for other sites of skin disease and underlying causes. A cytologic sample of debris is often collected from the ear and analyzed microscopically to characterize any infection. Occasionally, ear polyps, tumors or foreign bodies are found. These obstructions to the canal may require removal to improve the ear canal health. There are also some systemic conditions like thyroid disease, which may cause skin changes and increase the risk of otitis and infection development. Additional lab work is helpful in determining the presence of possible underlying medical conditions.

Some specific dog breeds are predisposed to ear problems, but all dogs are at risk. Occasionally, just one ear is problematic, but more often both ears are involved, especially if the otitis is associated with a systemic condition like allergies.

Most otitis and ear infections in the dog are located inside of the ear flap and all the way down to the ear drum (otitis externa). Sometimes, however, chronic infection can compromise the ear drum, allowing infection to penetrate into the middle ear (otitis media). Just like in people, there are several nerves and arteries closely associated with the middle ear that can become inflamed or infected. Increased pain and balance problems can be seen with these deeper infections.

Ear cleansing with a proper solution is an important part of your dog's care. When done correctly, cleaning can prevent otitis, especially in predisposed dogs with narrow canals, heavy ear flaps or in dogs that love to swim. Even cleaning after a bath can help remove any residual water in the canals. Your veterinarian can instruct you on the specific needs of your dog's ears, the selection of an appropriate cleanser, an effective cleansing technique and recommend a frequency to maintain clean, odor-free ears.

It can not be stressed enough that if there is active otitis present along with an infection, the sooner a diagnosis is made and treatment is begun, the more successful the results will be. Veterinarians preach every day that prevention is the most important aspect of animal health care. Monitoring your dog's skin closely -- especially ear canals and skin fold areas -- benefits your dog's overall health and comfort as much as a good diet and parasite prevention.

Healthy ears make a happy dog!