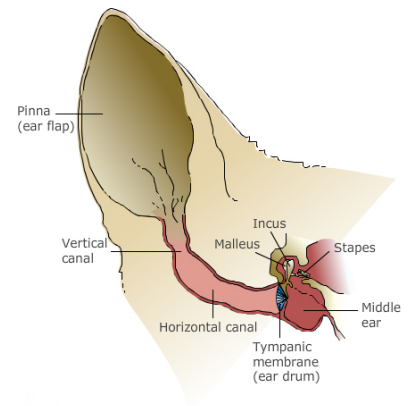


Dog Behavior and Training – Cleaning Ears

Why does my dog not like having his ears cleaned?

Most dogs' ears are a lot larger and their ear canals are much longer than ours are. They are certainly a lot more sensitive. We usually only need to clean them when there is a problem; however at this point they may already be sore, so that the dog learns that handling around the ears is painful and tries to avoid it. Therefore, it should not be surprising that your dog struggles when you try to handle his ears, and may even become aggressive. Dogs frequently develop inflammatory conditions of the ears, so it is important to train your dog to allow handling of its ears from an early age. Ideally, this is done when the ears are healthy, so that the dog learns that handling of the ears is not a painful procedure. Then, if your dog develops an ear infection that needs treatment, it will not be as much of an issue (see Handling and Food Bowl Exercises).



"Dogs commonly struggle and may even become aggressive when their ears are being handled due to past painful experiences."

If it is so sore, shouldn't I stop?

Unfortunately, if you stop when he struggles or acts aggressively, he may learn that this behavior achieves his objective. You must be aware that if the ear is extremely painful then the dog is objecting because of pain and not to be defiant. It is prudent to discuss oral medications for pain control with your veterinarian or alternate cleaning methods.

Are you suggesting that I should continue to struggle with him?

No. It is important that you never put yourself in danger; if you think there is a risk, you should seek professional assistance.

To conduct a full ear examination or to clean and start treatment on the ears when they are infected or inflamed, your veterinarian may recommend sedation or a general anesthetic and a thorough cleaning procedure in the veterinary office. Often, once the ears are properly cleaned and the medication begins to work, the ears become less painful, and it becomes easier for you to continue regular treatment at home. In some cases, your veterinarian will prescribe a pain control medication or an anti-inflammatory medication to be used along with topical medications. In some cases where the ears are particularly uncomfortable oral medications may even be used for a few days before starting the topical ear medication.

My dog is already very aggressive about having his ears touched. What should I do?

If your dog is showing signs of aggression, it may be necessary to use a muzzle before you begin treating the ears (see Muzzle Training). To learn how to gain safe and effective control with a head halter, see Training Products – Head Halter Training and Training Products – Head Halter Training – Synopsis. Again, be aware that pain will exacerbate fear and possibly aggression, and professional help in treatment may be the better option, rather than struggling with your pet.

"Your veterinarian may recommend heavy sedation or a general anesthetic."

Prevention of the behavior problem is obviously preferable, so once the current ear problem has resolved, you should begin to train your dog to allow his ears to be checked and gently cleaned as part of his routine grooming and to use food or toys as rewards to both distract your pet and to make positive associations with ear handling.

My dog has just had his ears cleaned under an anesthetic, and I have been given drops to apply, but I can't get near him. What can I do?

Following the steps outlined below should solve the problem in the majority of cases.

"In some cases, you will be more successful at applying the medication if you don't allow your pet to see the container, especially if it has developed an association between the bottle and painful treatments of the ear."

1. Ensure your dog is securely restrained using a nylon or plastic basket muzzle if necessary (see above). Alternately a leash and head halter can be used to control the head and muzzle while also allowing for release and reward if the pet shows no resistance.
2. Offer your dog a very delectable food treat with one hand and reach out towards one ear with the other. Repeat this exercise several times until your dog shows no flinching or avoiding on at least five successive occasions, then repeat on the other side. Move onto the next step when your dog consistently allows you to touch his ears.
3. Now offer your dog a treat and lift up the ear flap. Only reward those occasions when there is no flinching. Repeat as in step 2.
4. Next, progress to cleaning the ear flap with a mild cleanser or even just a damp cotton ball. Do not try to clean the ear canal at this stage. Start with short single wipes and then work up to multiple wiping sessions. Repeat as above.
5. Finally, have someone else feed the dog small pieces of favorite tidbits while you clean the ear canal and apply the medication as directed by your veterinarian. It may help to warm the medication up a little, especially if it has been refrigerated. In some cases, you will be more successful at applying the medication if you don't allow your pet to see the container, especially if he has developed an association between the bottle and painful treatments of his ear. To do this, hide the container within your hand and try to bring it up to his ear from the side, out of view of his eyes. Often if the treat is tasty enough and lasts long enough (e.g., peanut butter on a spoon or squeeze cheese), your dog may remain distracted and happy during the cleaning.
6. Finish with a treat and lots of praise and fuss.

How long is this going to take?



If your dog does not have sore ears and is not being aggressive, you may be able to teach him this procedure in a single day. However, if he is very head shy, it will take more time to get him accustomed to the procedure. In these cases, it may take several training sessions to progress through each of the steps, giving positive reinforcement (food rewards) for good behavior and negative reinforcement (no food reward) when the dog does not cooperate. Proceed at your pet's pace. A useful tip is to begin the first couple of training sessions when he is hungry (i.e., before you feed him). Food treats will then work miracles!

If you are still having problems then you should consult your veterinarian about other treatments options such as oral or injectable medication instead of drops or topical ointment, or arranging for professional help.

Once your dog's ears have improved from the treatment, it is important for you to continue to train him to allow ear handling. That way, if he does develop another problem in the future, your job will be much easier.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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