

When your dog has itchy, sore ears

Your veterinarian has just informed you that your dog has otitis, or inflammation of the ear. There are three stages of otitis. In the beginning, the external ear canal is affected, and you may notice that your dog is shaking its head or pawing at its ear. Your dog might also have an ear discharge, with or without odor. In the next stage, the disease spreads to the middle ear, which includes the eardrum. In the final stage, otitis spreads to the inner ear, which houses your dog's balance system.

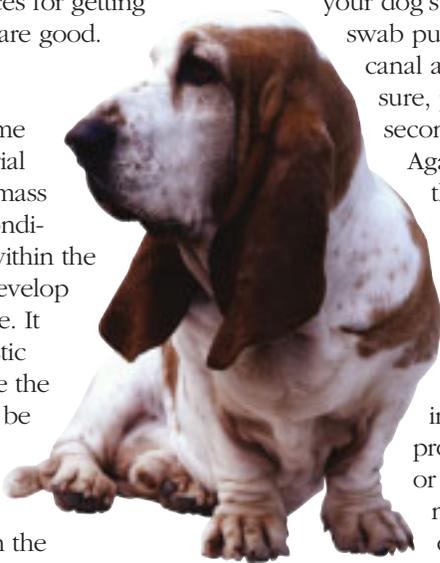
In the more severe stages, dogs are reluctant to open their mouths or chew and have a pronounced head tilt, balance problems, and drooping lips or eyelids. Luckily, most cases of otitis are caught during the first stage, and, at this stage, the chances for getting your dog's ears back in tip-top shape are good.

How did the otitis develop?

Many things cause dogs' ears to become inflamed, including ear mites, a bacterial or yeast infection, a foreign object or mass within the ear, allergies, or medical conditions that allow infection to develop within the ear. Some breeds are more likely to develop problems because of their ear structure. It can take time and a variety of diagnostic tests for your veterinarian to determine the underlying cause. But this cause must be identified, or the problem can worsen and spread farther into the ear, causing your dog intense pain and, possibly, necessitating surgery to drain the infected material and remove the affected tissues.

Even if bacterial or yeast infections aren't the primary cause, they often develop in affected ears. Your veterinarian will likely prescribe medication to treat these infections and show you how to administer it. Keep in mind that frequent follow-up visits will be necessary to monitor response to therapy.

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Cleaning your dog's ears

An important part of treating your dog's otitis involves frequent ear cleanings, which you can do at home. Make sure you clean your dog's ears either outdoors or in an area such as a tiled bathroom where nothing can be stained by debris from the ear canal. Use a two-stage cleaning technique. First, flood the ear canal with cleaning solution prescribed by your veterinarian. Make sure you fill the canal—don't just use a few drops. Allow the solution to remain in contact with the canal for at least 60 seconds, and gently massage the entire canal during this time. Dry the canal with a cotton ball. Use only real cotton balls, which are less irritating than synthetic ones are. Never clean your dog's ears with a cotton swab. The swab pushes debris farther into the ear canal and puts the eardrum under pressure, possibly causing it to rupture. The second stage is a repeat of the first.

Again allow the solution to contact the canal for a full 60 seconds or more and massage the ear. Then step back and let your dog shake its head.

The frequency of cleaning varies based on how severely your dog's ears are affected, but, in general, perform this cleaning process twice a day for the first one or two weeks, once a day for the next one or two weeks, and then once or twice a week thereafter.

Communicate with your veterinarian

Follow your veterinarian's instructions for cleaning your dog's ears and administering medications. Be sure to bring your dog in for each recheck appointment your veterinarian schedules, even after the inflammation has subsided. Otitis often recurs in dogs, and the medication that cleared it up the first time may not work the next time because a different type of infection may have developed. So be sure to see your veterinarian if signs do recur. ■