

## Water and ears just don't mix

Repeated exposure to water can result in residual moisture in your dog's ear, creating a wonderful environment for organisms to grow

For some dogs, water and ears just don't mix. You know you have a problem when you hear that consistent thump-thump-thump coming from your dog's crate. Unrelenting head shaking is usually the first clue that your dog has an ear problem. Termed "swimmer's ear" in people, ear problems are common in people and retrievers that are exposed to water environments.

The canine ear is not structured well for easy removal of fluid. The human ear canal is more suited anatomically to remove unwanted water because the canal is horizontal in nature. Contrast this with the canine ear canal with its vertical and horizontal canals creating an almost P-trap configuration — kind of like an ear sewer. Most of the time, dogs are capable of removing any accumulated fluid by vigorously shaking their head. Nevertheless, repeated water exposure results in residual moisture, creating a wonderful environment for organisms to grow. Otitis externa (OE) is the result.

### Otitis externa



Most dogs are capable of flushing out any accumulating fluid in the ear by shaking — but some preventative medicine after water work never hurts.

OE is inflammation or infection of the lining of the ear canal. It commonly occurs when a warm moist environment is created in the ear canal. This environment is most often seen after repeated water exposure, allergic conditions, or a combination of the two.

The actual organisms that create the infection are usually bacteria and yeast that are already in the ear, but have "seized the moment" due to the favorable conditions created. Symptoms to watch for besides head shaking include: pawing at the ears, intense redness of the inner side of the pinnae (floppy part), or discharge from the ear.

Fortunately, the intense pain that many people suffer is not a significant problem for the canine with a simple OE. If you do notice severe pain, there may another problem going on such as a middle or inner ear infection. In these cases, additional symptoms may include a head tilt (usually to the affected side), vomiting, incoordination, or circling. If you see any of these more severe symptoms, you should seek veterinary care for your dog as soon as possible. Damage to these areas can cause serious problems that could put your dog out of action for a long time — possibly for good.

If your dog appears especially prone to developing OE after short-term water exposures, he may have an allergic component. Our dogs don't exhibit their allergies by sneezing and coughing as we do — they itch because the allergens cause a severe inflammatory response in the skin. You can think of the ear canals as long extensions of the skin down into the ear — that's why many dogs have hair growing in their ears. It is also why allergies can show up as OE.

I consider the ears (as well as the anal glands) as allergy sentinels, alerting me to a possible allergic condition. Many times, these areas are the first to exhibit symptoms of an allergic problem, and they may be the only areas. If your dog has a full blown allergic condition, you will know it. They will usually scratch themselves raw and have a myriad of other skin or hair-loss issues. However, if your retriever has a very mild allergy, the problem of occasional or chronic ear infections could be the only sign. These dogs may acquire ear infections even without direct access to water, especially in very moist, humid environments (if this is your dog, then I sympathize with you — I have one of these, too).

### **Preventative measures**

The best preventative measure for OE is to keep your dog's ears dry. If possible, discontinue activities that get the ears wet. This can be a frustrating prospect if you are in the middle of a successful hunting season or training period filled with water retrieves. In this case, I suggest you accomplish this by keeping an appropriate ear-drying solution on hand to use after your dog has been in the water — which includes during hunting, training, or simply bathing — and begin using it before problems arise. Being out in the rain seldom results in problems for most dogs, but high moisture levels for extended periods can cause a problem for allergic dogs.

### **Drying solutions**

Now, what should you use? The basic ingredient of most drying solutions is isopropyl alcohol. This works because water and alcohol don't mix. The alcohol displaces the water, which is shaken out of the ear canal, and then the alcohol evaporates, working to dry any remaining moisture. Because of this, rubbing alcohol is a commonly used, over-the-counter product recommend for OE. For some dogs, a small squirt of isopropyl alcohol massaged in each ear after being in the water is all it takes to dry the ears and prevent OE.

There are also many good commercial, alcohol-based products available, such as Swimmer Ear, manufactured by VetSolutions. The isopropyl alcohol in these products is usually in combination with additional ingredients, such as antiseptics (to decrease bacteria and yeast) and fragrances (for that just-cleaned aroma!).

The downside to any alcohol based product is that: One, it burns. If there are any abrasions or sensitive areas in the ear canals, your dog will not be happy, and probably will be reluctant to allow such a procedure after his next dip in the pond. Two, if the tympanic membrane (eardrum) is damaged, it can create problems down in the middle or inner ear, since the eardrum is the primary barrier protecting the middle and inner ear. Most dogs will briefly shake their head after administration of a drying agent, but if your dog cries, shakes his head excessively, or exhibits other unusual behavior, you should take him to your veterinarian so that the ear canal and eardrum can be examined.

Even the best preventative measures sometimes fail. Thankfully, the large majority of dogs that get OE will respond well to simple corrective measures if the problem is addressed promptly. Like the campfire that is smoldering, stamp it out! Be proactive. Act decisively and quickly. The longer it is left untreated, the harder it will be to correct. By following a few simple steps as soon as you notice a problem, you can prevent most water related ear flare-ups from becoming major problems.

### **Cleaning**

Appropriate cleaning can snuff out OE before it starts. It can also make all the difference when trying to keep a chronic ear condition at bay. Dogs that have ongoing ear conditions can benefit from having ears cleaned periodically even when they have not had water exposure.

All-purpose ear cleaners are available at most pet supply stores. They usually consist of cleaning solutions with a small amount of drying agent (note: cleaners are not the same as drying agents; stand-alone drying agents are designed to use in small amounts that evaporate after application). A home remedy that works well for general ear treatment is made by diluting white vinegar with water to make a 1:4 solution.

Sometimes stronger, medicated cleaners are needed, which are available through your veterinarian. My current favorite is a medicated ear solution called Malaseb Flush, by DVM Pharmaceuticals. It has a combination of antiseptic and antifungal as active ingredients (chlorhexadine and miconazole). These two ingredients work synergistically against bacteria and yeast commonly found in the ear.

The best way I've found to clean ears is by using a process of thorough lavage (or flushing) with an appropriate cleaner. After filling the ear canal with the cleaner, aggressively massage the outside of the ear canal. Don't be shy! Reach around the canal and rub vigorously. The solution should come out the entrance to the canal as you rub. Do this repeatedly until the solution that comes out looks like the solution that you put in.

Now here is the key: Allow your dog to shake excess solution out — don't use those Q-tips and dig down in the ear canal, you will only force any debris farther down into the canal. Instead, allow the solution and vigorous massage to flush out anything that may be down in the canal. After you are satisfied that the ear is clean, use a cloth to wipe the outside of the ear dry, and you're done.

### **In-season problems**

If your dog decides to get his OE during the middle of the season and you cannot keep him out of the water, you may be in for a challenge. In these cases, the best you may be able to do is keep the situation under control. If the problem seems to be getting worse after consistent cleanings, you could be dealing with a stubborn infection that will require additional treatment. This is the time to have your dog checked by your veterinarian.

If overzealous head shaking is allowed to continue too long, ear hematomas may form. You will recognize these because the pinnae will blow up like a small water balloon. This happens when blood vessels rupture in the ear from extended shaking of the head. Surgical correction is usually required and can sometimes produce scars resulting in a deformed ear.

In a few extreme cases of long-standing OE, secondary problems can occur from the chronic irritation/infection. Some examples are: middle and inner ear infections, narrowing of the ear canal, and hearing loss. In some cases, the damage is permanent; others may require extensive diagnostic, medical therapy, or surgery to correct.

Proper prevention and consistent cleaning can go a long way toward maintaining healthy ears. In the end, it pays to be diligent with ear care for the comfort and performance of your hunting pal.



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