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Ear infections can be very uncomfortable for the animal and cause long-term damage to the ear canals if they are not treated correctly and promptly. Chronically recurring ear infections lead to changes in the ear that may require surgery. Our specialist dermatologists have developed specialised ways of managing ear problems to avoid the need for surgery in most cases. At MVSC we have a video otoscope, which is a very valuable tool used for cleaning and flushing ears. It also allows us to assess the health and status of the ear canal, ear drums and allows access to the middle ear if a middle ear infection is suspected. An MRI may also be needed in certain cases in order to correctly diagnose what is going on deep within an infected ear.

Ear infections are typically initially triggered by allergies, foreign bodies (such as grass seeds), wetting of the ear canal from bath water or regular swimming. All of these examples can lead to infections from bacteria and/or yeast (fungal) organisms. In rare cases it may be a tumour or polyp that is present blocking the ear canal and this can also lead to infections.

When to suspect your dog has an ear infection?

Common signs of ear infection include:

- A red, warm ear flap
- Head shaking
- Affected ears held down
- Scratching or rubbing at the ears
- Painful ears when handling
- Smell or visible discharge from the ear canal

Treatment

Cytology (taking smears and examining the discharge under the microscope) is needed to identify what type of infection is present and what the most appropriate ear treatment is. This will always require application of ear drops and depending on the type of infection and exact problems will almost never be less than 14 days of treatment. Ear cleaning or ear flushing under anaesthesia is also often required with recurrent ear infections. This is done with a video otoscope, which is a specialised piece of equipment that requires expert skills to use correctly to achieve accurate results.

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Does your pet need a veterinary dermatologist?

Most cases of simple ear infections will improve after treatment but if the infection persists or recurs then referral is often required. Sometimes specialised equipment (a fibre-optic video otoscope, MRI, BAER machine) may be needed to effectively assess and clean the deeper portion of the ear canal. None of these specific tests can be achieved without this equipment.

Treatment may also fail if infection has damaged the ear drum and spread into the middle ear. Adequate visualisation of the middle ear and the ear drum is often not possible in inflamed ears without specialised equipment (fibre-optic video otoscope and MRI). If your pet has persistent or recurrent ear infection, then you should discuss with your local veterinarian about a referral to a specialist dermatologist for further investigation and treatment. In most cases it is necessary to address the underlying triggers e.g. allergies and manage this in order to avoid relapses.