

Gladys from Modesto writes in about Buffy her nine-year-old cocker spaniel with ear problems. Buffy has had ear infections on and off for most of her life and currently is being treated with some type of ointment in the ears without apparent success. Buffy is acting very painful in her ears and her activity level is way down.

It sounds to me like Buffy is suffering from chronic ear disease something we term chronic otitis. This occurs when an ear infection is allowed to progress over a long period of time leading to secondary changes in the ear canal that are often times irreversible. Gladys shares that she has treated Buffy many times in her life for ear infections and, I suspect, there has never been true resolution of Buffy's otitis. Otitis in dogs is a fairly common disease we deal with in our canine companions. In uncomplicated cases it involves the outer canal of the ear which in dogs is quite deep. There are contributing factors that can lead to ear infections in canines; some of them are external and some are inherent. External factors include foreign material getting into the ear canal such as water or plant material (think foxtail), which can disallow proper air circulation and drying of the canal which then can lead to a perfect moist warm environment for the development of infection. Inherent factors include anatomic issues such as narrowing of the ear canal and/or increase in the number of wax/sebum producing glands in the ear canal which lead to decreased air circulation in the canal, along with increased secretions. Some dogs have heavy ears that hang down over the canal openings, further decreasing good air circulation. Cocker spaniels like Buffy can have all of these mentioned inherent factors and, as a result, this breed shows a very high incidence for the development of ear disease.

I want to outline in a general sense what should be done when a dog is faced with otitis and then specifically address Buffy with her chronic otitis. When a dog is presented for otitis it is very important to identify what is causing the infection. Is it a bacterial infection? Is it a fungal (yeast) infection? Is it a combination of both? This is very important as it allows us to focus our therapy specifically against the offending disease organisms. This diagnostic step is done quite simply by swabbing the ear canals and culturing the material obtained for bacteria and examining a slide of the material under the microscope to see what is involved. The next step is to thoroughly flush the ear canals to remove the debris and as much of the offending disease agents as possible. This often times involves a general anesthetic to allow for thorough flushing without discomfort and pain.

Treatment then involves some combination of topical medication specific to the organisms involved and often times a flushing agent to be used at home. In the last few years, we have been having good success using ear packs that are specific for the infectious agents involved that are instilled into the patient's ear canals after the ears are flushed here in the hospital. These packs can last a week in the canal and keep the caretakers from having to treat their companions once or twice daily at home. The patients are rechecked in a week and retreated if necessary, with resolution usually occurring in one or two treatments. There are cases that require systemic treatments as well as topical, depending of the severity of the case. These might include antibiotics in the case of bacterial otitis and anti inflammatory medication to control inflammation and discomfort associated with the otitis.

Buffy is in a different league when it comes to her otitis. If left uncured, otitis, as mentioned, leads to chronic changes which can include further narrowing of the ear canal, destruction of the ear drum and then invasion into the middle and inner ear canals which then cause infection in those areas which leads to severe discomfort and pain. Further progression causes mineralization of the tympanic bulla which is the boney chamber of the inner ear which houses part of the balance system. This can lead to head tilts and abnormal postures, again along with worsening pain. These cases can lead to total shut down of the ear canal to the point where there is no longer any medical option for therapy. These patients need surgical intervention.

The surgery involved in chronic severe otitis cases in dogs involves removal of the entire ear canal, a surgery termed total ear canal ablation. These patients are no longer able to hear post surgery, though many can not hear very well presurgically due to severe disease of the canal(s). The surgery allows these patients to return to a good quality of life without pain and this shows in their demeanor after recovery. I have seen patients that I have performed this surgery on acting like puppies, according to their caretakers, as a result of no longer living with chronic pain.

Hopefully, Buffy has not reached the point of needing ear canal ablation surgery. She is likely at the point where she needs a major ear canal workup and treatment at the very least. Hopefully with proper care, she can be relieved of her otitis.