

How to Clean the Ears

BACKGROUND

Ear infections are common in pets, and an important way to help eliminate these infections is to clean the ears. It is important to treat the ear canal correctly, ensuring the solution reaches the target location. With practice, instilling solutions into the ear canal is easy and can be done at home as needed.

GETTING STARTED

Equipment/materials needed:

- Gloves
- Cotton balls or gauze
- Ear-cleaning solution

Your veterinarian may have prescribed a solution to place in your pet's ear. You should wear latex (or similar) medical exam gloves to prevent you from coming in contact with potential bacteria or fungi your pet may harbor. Basic hygiene is important, and you should be sure to wash your hands immediately after each ear-cleaning session.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

Ear-cleaning solutions are generally applied to maintain your pet's ear canals and prevent infection. However, if you notice any of the following symptoms, you should contact your veterinarian immediately:

- Increased fluid or pasty discharge from one or both ears
- Increased redness, swelling, or heat from the ear
- Increased pain
- Increased shaking or scratching of the ears
- Inability to instill the solution (for example, if your pet will not allow it or because you feel you are not doing it correctly)

If your pet shows resentment to having this done, stop the procedure and call your veterinarian for further advice. The ear may be too painful to treat without additional medications, and it is imperative that you not hurt your pet or put yourself at risk of a nip or bite. This may also be an indication that the condition is worsening and should be checked immediately.

Keep in mind that some individuals are more prone to ear disease than others. This can be due to ear shape (floppy-eared dogs are especially susceptible), environment and activity (swimming allows water in the ears and favors infection), and likely genetic predisposition as well. Therefore, ear cleaning should be done when your individual dog or cat needs it, which is different from one individual to the next. Be sure to ask your veterinarian about the best interval between ear cleanings to avoid over- or underdoing it. Excessive ear cleaning must be avoided because it causes inflammation in the ear canal, which is totally counterproductive.

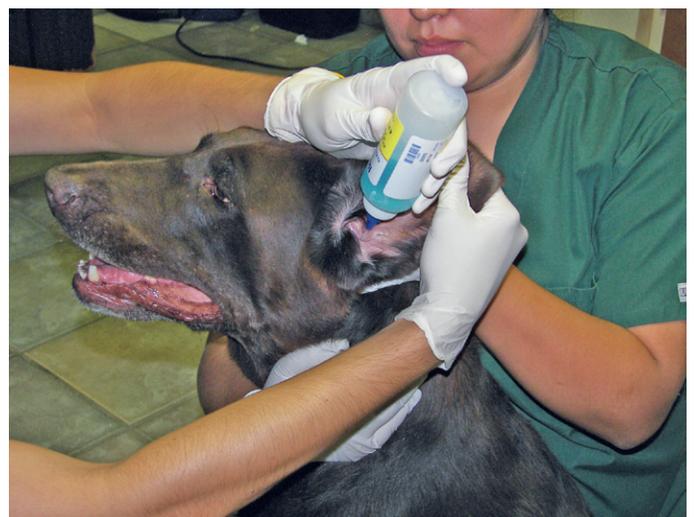
Never use Q-Tips or other cotton-tipped swabs to clean your pet's ears. Too often, this results in pushing the debris back into the ear canal, which is the opposite of the intended effect. Cotton balls or gauze work well to remove debris from the ear flap and upper ear canal.

PROCEDURE

- In calm pets, ear cleaning can be done with just one person, but with young, excited animals, or pets that dislike (or are unfamiliar with) ear cleaning, it may be necessary to have one

person distracting and/or holding the pet while another person instills the solution. The whole process should take about 5 minutes. If it is too complicated or difficult, notify your veterinarian to discuss whether there are alternative strategies.

- A really helpful preparatory step is to put the bottle of ear-cleaning solution under your own armpit for 10 or 15 minutes before the ear cleaning. This brings the solution to body temperature and makes it much more comfortable and pleasant for your pet.
- With one hand, gently flip the ear flap straight up. This is best done by cupping the ear flap (pinna) in your hand, with the haired part of the ear against the palm of your hand and your thumb on the hairless inner surface of the ear flap. You should be able to see the inside of the ear (ear canal) this way. Some breeds of dogs have naturally upright ears, and in these dogs, the hand can simply be cupped behind the ear.
- Holding the ear flap cupped in the palm of your hand means that the ear canal takes on the shape of a funnel. You can then place the lukewarm cleansing solution into the ear canal, allowing the solution to fill the canal to the brim. This means a gentle stream of the solution will need to go in for several seconds, not just a few drops. In a medium-size dog, 1 tablespoon (15 mL) typically will be necessary; a half to 1 teaspoon (2.5 to 5 mL) is expected for cats. Do not allow the bottle tip to touch the ear canal, which would contaminate the bottle and its contents.
- Then lower the ear flap and massage the ear canal for 1 minute. Do this by using your thumb and forefinger to gently compress and roll the tube-shaped ear canal. You can feel it through the skin and hair at the base of the ear, directed inward and slightly toward the dog or cat's hind end.
- Having placed the cleaning solution in the ear and done the ear massaging, now allow your pet to shake his or her head. This will loosen debris in the ear canal and propel it outward. Then use a cotton ball to clean the ear flap and upper ear canal.



Correct way to place cleaning solution in the ear. For the dog's left ear, as shown, your right hand holds the pinna (ear flap) upward, and your left hand places the nozzle of the bottle at the entrance to the ear canal.



After the cleaning solution has been placed in the ear canal, use your right hand to gently massage the outer part of the ear canal. It is just forward of the ear opening (shown where the right thumb is, here).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My dog/cat really doesn't like ear cleanings. What do I do?

Often, making sure the ear-cleaning solution is at body temperature (using the armpit technique described above) is all that is needed for making the process much more comfortable and therefore acceptable to a pet. Also, be sure to offer him or her a special treat when you are finished, every time, to make it something he or she looks forward to. If resentment and resistance persist, contact your veterinarian, because a short course of oral medications or an injection of medication may reduce much of the inflammation and pain that cause a patient to resist ear cleaning.

How often do I need to clean the ears?

This will depend on the individual pet and any conditions being treated. Your veterinarian will direct you how often to clean your pet's ears. It is important that you follow the directions given, because some pets require frequent ear cleanings and others much less so.

AFTERWARDS

Once you have finished cleaning the ears, discard any remaining used gauze and gloves. Replace the cap on the cleaning solution, and place it in a safe area out of reach of children and pets.

Can my pet cause more damage if he continuously shakes or scratches his head?

Yes, your pet can cause more damage to his or her own ears through scratching and headshaking. In such situations, an Elizabethan collar (E-collar) may be necessary temporarily to prevent scratching of the ears and serious self-induced trauma while ear medication takes effect. Contact your veterinarian if your pet continues to shake his/her head or scratch constantly at the ears.

The ears look redder after I clean them than before. What do I do?

This is common and expected with some liquid ear solutions and should subside quickly (typically an hour or so) afterwards. If you find that the ears are staying much redder than before, be sure to contact your veterinarian to discuss an alternative treatment (or assess whether the ear problem is itself responsible for these changes).

OTHER RELATED INFORMATION SHEET

- [How to Assemble and Use an Elizabethan Collar](#)

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