

Ear Cleaning 101

Home ear cleanings can enhance treatment of an existing ear problem or prevent the development of a new one. Some dogs that are prone to ear infections may need regular cleanings between veterinary visits. Home ear cleanings can also help remove dirt and wax that can prevent needed medications from reaching inflamed areas, as well as get rid of allergens and microbes that may be contributing to the inflammation or infection.

There are several techniques for home ear cleaning. This handout describes the simplest one. Ear cleaning can be relatively easy to do at home, as long as a few simple guidelines are followed. The most important guideline is to always put health and safety first: *If, for any reason, your pet becomes so agitated that you feel you are at risk of being bitten, stop.* If the procedure seems excessively painful for your pet, stop and get professional advice.

Create a Wiggle-Free Zone

Although some pets are willing to sit or lie quietly while you clean their ears, the reality is that most object, at least at first. Choose your work space carefully! Ear cleaning can be messy, so it's best to pick a room that's easy to clean (e.g., bathroom, laundry room, shower stall) or to even go outside.

Here are some tips on how to keep your pet wiggle free while you work:

- ▶ Place your pet on a stable work surface that you can stand next to and allow him or her to lie down, either in an upright “sphinx” position or flat on his or her side. Wrap one arm—the one you will use to treat the ear—over your pet's shoulders, and use your upper arm and elbow to help keep him or her still. You can wrap your other arm under your pet's neck to hold the ear open and ear flap back.
- ▶ If you don't have a suitable high work surface, you can use the same method while seated on the floor, either holding the front of your pet's body partially against your body or on your lap. If you have a large dog, you can have it sit back against your legs while



Use one hand to hold the ear flap back so that you can treat the ear with the other.

- you stand behind it. Sometimes it helps to back the pet into a corner.
- ▶ Small dogs and cats can be wrapped in a large towel—rolled up like a burrito—and held against your body, leaving only the head free. Be sure not to wrap your small pet too tightly.
- ▶ If your pet struggles, talk to him or her calmly. Take a break if he or she becomes extremely agitated. Massaging the base of the ears (unless they are painful) should feel good to the pet and may help calm him or her enough that you can resume treatment.
- ▶ Be sure to reward good behavior!
- ▶ If this method fails, get a helper to hold the pet while you treat the ear.

What You'll Need

- ▶ Old clothes
- ▶ Safe, easily cleanable work area (tile or linoleum floors, water-resistant walls)
- ▶ Towel
- ▶ Nonirritating ear wash or rinse recommended by your veterinarian
- ▶ Cotton balls or tissues
- ▶ Cotton swabs (to be used on outer ear only)

Cleaning Steps

There is no one perfect way to perform an ear cleaning, but the general steps are as follows.

1. Squeeze

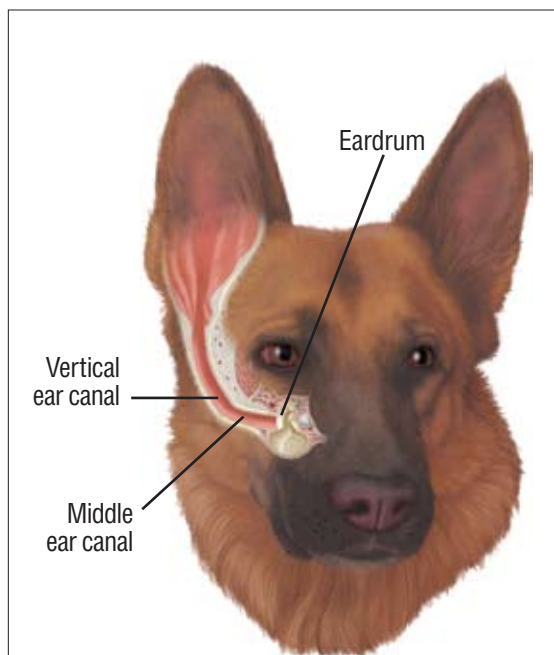
With your pet properly restrained, hold the ear solution bottle just over the opening of the affected ear and gently squeeze the prescribed amount of solution into the ear. Do not squeeze the solution bottle too hard, as a powerful stream can irritate tender and inflamed ear structures.

Tip: Store the cleaning solution at room temperature to avoid causing unnecessary discomfort to the pet. (Do not store ear medications that require refrigeration at room temperature; however, allowing them to reach room temperature before use makes them more comfortable.)

2. Massage

After administering the solution, fold the ear flap down against your pet's head and try to prevent your pet from shaking his or her head too much. Gently massage the very base of the ear to distribute the solution as far as possible into the deep horizontal ear canal. To massage the base of the ear, follow the cartilage tube of the ear canal with your finger down along the pet's neck until you feel the tube bend and turn inward. Then gently compress the tube with your finger. (Unless the ear is extremely painful, most animals like this part!) Keep the solution in the ear for the prescribed amount of time. When you are done, allow your pet to shake its head to remove some of the solution.

Tip: Prepare for the head shake! Wear old clothes and keep a towel handy. You may want to drape the towel over your pet's head or neck before administering the solution.



Anatomy of the ear. One look at the inside of a dog's ear shows why dogs are often prone to ear problems. Debris, allergens, bacteria, and moisture are all easily trapped in the long, deep ear canal, especially the middle ear, which is almost horizontal. The arrow points to the place to massage the base of the ear. (With permission from *Pfizer Atlas of Infection in Dogs and Cats*. Wilmington, DE: The Gloyd Group, Inc; 2008.)

3. Wipe and Swab

When most of the solution has been shaken out, use cotton balls or tissues to gently wipe away any discharge, loosened debris, and remaining liquid from the ear flap, side of the neck, and hair below the ear as well as the opening of the ear canal. Cotton swabs can be used to clean small skin pockets in the visible ear.

Tip: Do not push cotton swabs into the ear canal, even for a short distance. A sudden shake of the head or slip of the hand could result in a cotton swab puncturing the delicate eardrum or pushing debris back inside the inner ear canal.

Follow Recommendations, Please!

The ear is a very delicate structure. It is very important to closely follow recommendations regarding ear cleanings. Treating too frequently or too aggressively can make the problem worse, not better. Sensitive, already inflamed parts of the ear can be damaged. Because many ear washes contain chemicals and drying agents, it is also important to use only products recommended by a veterinarian. ♦

Signs of Ear Trouble

- ▶ Odor
- ▶ Scratching/rubbing at ears or side of head
- ▶ Discharge
- ▶ Debris
- ▶ Pain
- ▶ Shaking/tilting of the head
- ▶ Head shyness (not wanting the head or ears to be touched)
- ▶ Irritability