

Points on Pets: Ear mites most likely culprits

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: We have three outdoor cats that live in our barn with our other critters. They are great "mousers" and seem to generally be in good health most of the time. They are very tame and enjoy being around people. These three cats have recurring problems with ear infections. The ears contain a lot of bad smelling dark stuff and the cats scratch a lot at their ears. It seems like the cats are passing the problems back and forth. We have repeatedly treated all of the cats with medications that we bought at our local grocery store. The medications state that they are effective in curing common ear infections in pets.

How can we end this cycle of ear infections in our cats?

A: Of course it is impossible to tell you exactly how to control the ear problems in your cats without actually seeing them or knowing much more about them. However, it is quite likely that your cats have ear mites, a common cause of ear infections in cats and dogs.

Eight-legged ear mites commonly live in the ear canals of infected dogs and cats and feed on skin debris. If you have excellent eyesight and are patient, you might be able to see the tiny white mites crawling in the dark, foul smelling ear debris. Live ear mites usually appear as moving white specks about the size of the head of a pin.

Most veterinarians diagnose ear mites by seeing them through a magnified otoscope while examining the infected ears or by examining some of the dark debris with a microscope. Your veterinarian will likely prescribe an insecticide in an oily preparation for you to place in the ears of all of your cats.

Because ear mites are contagious among pets, all of the pets within a household should be treated at the same time. It is not uncommon for outside animals to spread ear mites among themselves. Your neighbors' pets might also have ear mites and be cycling them back to your cats. As much as possible, pets with ear mites should be isolated from animals without ear mites. However, this is often difficult to do and, therefore, the cycle continues. Your veterinarian can give you specific advice about how to handle your cats' ear infections.

Q: Although our 4-year-old male beagle has bred several dogs, he has never gotten any pregnant. All of these females became pregnant when bred to another dog. Our dog does not seem to have any problems with the breeding process. He seems to know what to do and is very willing.

Can our veterinarian evaluate our dog's semen?

A: Most veterinarians in general small animal practice conduct breeding soundness examinations on male dogs. The evaluation usually includes a complete physical examination of the dog; a detailed genital tract examination; and collection and examination of a representative semen sample. The semen sample is usually collected in an artificial vagina designed for the dog. The presence of a female dog in season usually makes the collection procedure easier.

After completing a thorough breeding soundness examination, your veterinarian will be able to tell you if your dog is fertile or infertile. Hopefully, he/she will be able to tell you why your dog is not getting fertile females pregnant and offer a solution for the problem. If your veterinarian does not conduct breeding soundness examinations, you should ask to be referred to an animal reproduction specialist (theriogenologist) in your area.

Write to Pets, P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112-0190. Only questions of general interest will be answered in this column.

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