

Your Golden's Ears

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As you have probably already had the opportunity to observe, Golden Retrievers have a propensity for ear problems. While they are not alone in this regard, they do seem to be over-represented when compared to many other breeds. Ear problems range from mild accumulations of cerumen (wax) to foul smelling, inflamed, painful ears which just never seem to clear up. Herein lies the question. What should/can you do to relieve the irritation and nuisance for you and your dog?

It is a good idea to do routine maintenance on all dogs' ears. This can be as simple as a weekly "ear check." If the ear canals are free of debris, and the skin of the ear looks a healthy light pink color, let them alone and rejoice (because your dog is in a small minority). If there is a small amount of tan to dark brown wax, use a little hydrogen peroxide or ear cleaning solution on a cotton ball to gently wipe out the external ear canal. You can safely insert your finger as far as it will easily go to clean the canal without endangering the dog. If you have a need to use cotton swabs (and you really don't) be sure to use them only as deep as you can see. Going too deeply can easily injure the eardrum. If you are excessively vigorous in your cleaning, you will actually create irritation, which encourages wax buildup.

If the wax accumulation is excessive, or if infection is present, then more aggressive cleaning is warranted. This involves instilling ear cleaning solution directly into the ear canal. Lift the ear flap and place approximately 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of cleaning solution into the ear canal. (More will not hurt, but is not necessary.) Gently massage the base of the ear to loosen any debris from deep within the canal. Then gently lift the debris from the canal with a cotton ball on the end of your finger. Repeat this process until the ear appears clean. Do not expect the ear to be "perfect" after one cleaning. I generally recommend cleaning once daily for 3 to 5 days or until no discharge is present. It is important that the ear be medicated as well. Cleaning alone generally results in a high rate of recurrence. I generally medicate the ears twice daily with a topical preparation such as Tresaderm or Otomax twice daily for 7 to 10 days. If a severe infection is present, I'll often add an oral antibiotic to the regimen.

There are many causes for "ear infections." Some dogs just seem to accumulate a lot of wax. For these dogs, regular cleaning alone is sufficient. Some dogs are susceptible to ear problems secondary to swimming. For these dogs, I find that a few drops of a half and half combination of distilled white vinegar and isopropyl alcohol in each ear after swimming often prevents yeast growth and helps to prevent bacterial infection. In my opinion, the most common reason, by far, for recurrent ear problems in this breed is underlying allergy. All sources of allergy (flea, inhalant, and food allergy) can manifest as ear problems. Frequently the dog's ears become inflamed secondary to allergy and produce copious wax. If left untreated, bacteria and yeast then easily colonize the ear and lead to ear infection. In these cases, unless you treat the underlying allergy, the ear problems will either never be controlled, or will recur soon after discontinuing the treatment. These are the dogs who have frequent ear problems. For these dogs, treating the ears as outlined above, along with systemic anti-inflammatory drugs, will help to control the problem.

There are many different types of cleaning solutions used to treat ears. I feel that nearly all of them are effective, and none is all that much better than another. The vinegar/alcohol mixture I referred to above is an excellent and inexpensive cleaning solution, as are most of the commercial preparations. There is also a whole host of ear medications. They are also

individually very effective in most cases. Don't hesitate to try a different kind if one is unsuccessful for you.

Most importantly, keep on top of any ear problems. They can get out of hand very quickly. Once they do, you will have a long and difficult job of returning them to normal. You may feel silly seeing your veterinarian for a "simple" ear infection, but he or she can determine the cause and prescribe treatment early enough to make a big difference.