

Early Situation

Is your dog suffering from an ear infection?

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Q. I am hoping that you can help me with my Dalmatian. He is approximately 10 years old (we don't know the exact age because we adopted him from a shelter). Charlie is 54 pounds and we take him to the vet every six months for vaccinations.

Over the past three months, Charlie has been shaking his head a lot. It is similar to when he shakes his head after getting a bath. He shakes his head (where his ears flap) all day and all night (since he doesn't sleep well anymore). When I took him to our regular vet, they told me that it was allergies and gave him a steroid shot. It got better for a couple of weeks, but then he started shaking his head again.

We were in West Texas about a month ago and contacted a friend of the family who is a vet. I told him what was happening and he thought Charlie's head shaking was due to old age and he was shaking his head so he could loosen his neck muscles. He said that if he is constantly making his "nest" at night, he is trying to get comfortable. This vet prescribed tramadol for Charlie's pain. We were only given a 10-day supply (enough to get us home to see our vet again). In those 10 days, Charlie was back to his old self: sleeping well and no head shaking. We thought the problem was solved.

We made another appointment with our regular vet and they ended up prescribing carprofen. We were given a 14-day supply to see if it would work and we are 11 days into the prescription and it hasn't worked at all. Charlie is miserable and is now pressing/rubbing his head on the carpet. We have been told that Charlie's ears are clean and there is no wax buildup or bad odor, so we know it is not an ear infection. There were also no signs of ear mites.

We plan on taking Charlie to a new vet next week and were wondering if you could give us some insight as to what might be going on with our furry friend. We were told that he is starting to show early signs of arthritis in his back legs. Should we continue use with tramadol or should we start looking for something else?

A. What an interesting case! Head shaking is almost always due to a problem with the ears. Most of the time there is an ear infection (due to infection or allergies), or a foreign body (like a grass awn or other thorn). Sometimes, the problem is deeper down, on the other side of the eardrum. In these kinds of cases, there can be a middle ear infection or inflammation of the nerves that run near the eardrum. Rarely, the problem is due to a problem with the inner ear, or vestibular system. Usually dogs with these kind of problems have a hard time keeping their balance, and are leaning or falling to one side. In all of these cases, a thorough ear exam, sometimes with sedation, is required to make a diagnosis.