

Dog's Bad Ear Infection

Cauliflower-looking ear likely caused by atopy.

By Jon Geller, DVM

Q. I have a problem with my 8-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever, Biscuit. I took her to the veterinarian a little over a week ago for an ear infection for which they prescribed medications. She had pus and a bad smell in her ear. But she also had a bunch of lumps in her ear. They are not going away with treatment. It looks like cauliflower. What is it and what can I do?

A. It sounds like your dog has a serious ear problem. I will take the liberty of making an electronic diagnosis, which easily could be so far off it might spin out of cyberspace. Your veterinarian, with the ability to actually examine Biscuit's ear and entire body, has a much better shot at getting it right.

Labrador Retrievers have a genetic tendency toward major skin problems due to allergies. Like humans, they can be allergic to different substances that float around in the air, such as pollen, cottonseed, etc. Unlike humans, these allergies show up as intensely itchy skin, loss of hair, and severe skin infections, including ears. The condition is known as atopy.

Untreated, ear infections caused by atopy can cause a progressive narrowing of the ear canal, causing a cauliflower appearance to the inside of the ear. The ear will secrete pus if the infection is severe enough, and then scar, which causes the narrowing of the canal.

At a certain point, the canal becomes so narrow that it's impossible to treat ear infections with medication and cleaning, and your dog is unable to hear out of the ear. Unfortunately, the ear can be very painful and cause major discomfort.

It looks like this is what is going on with Biscuit. At this point, you must consider radical surgery where the entire ear canal is removed. If the other ear is also affected, it may require surgery, too.

Some veterinarians do not routinely do ear canal resections and ablations, as they are called, so you may want to get a referral to a surgical specialist, or to a veterinarian who does the procedure on a regular basis.

It is an expensive procedure, with significant aftercare, but it will result in a permanent, pain-free solution. It sounds like Biscuit, like many Labs, is too good of a dog to "complain" about her ears, but from the photos it is apparent that they are inflamed and infected with narrowed canals.

Good luck, and be sure to be persistent about getting a second opinion, or a referral to a veterinarian who does ear surgery.

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