

Ear Mites

Also Known As: Otodectes cynotis

Transmission or Cause: Ear mites are passed from one animal to another through close contact. Humans rarely also can get a skin rash from the parasite, and, on rare occasions, can get the mites in their own ears. Good hygiene usually will prevent mites from affecting people.

Affected Animals: All animals, including humans, can get mites.

Overview: Highly contagious, ear mites are a common cause of many ear problems in cats and, less commonly, in dogs. Ear mites are found in cats of all ages, but kittens tend to be infected more commonly. These mites can cause intense itching. Severe trauma to the infected area may result when cats scratch the irritated skin.

Often, but not always, a dark, granular substance will be present in the ear canal of a cat with ear mites, and signs of irritation and itchiness will be evident. Diagnosis can be achieved through visual identification of the mites under a microscope from debris or skin scrapings. The prognosis for ear mites is excellent with proper treatment, which generally involves topical application of a miticide to the affected areas.

Clinical Signs: Clinical signs of ear mites develop as the mites feed in the ear canal. The feeding causes irritation and the canals will fill with wax, mite debris, and blood. The ear canals typically have a dark, coffee ground-like substance in them. Cats may have itching of the ears, but not always. The mites also can crawl to other parts of the body and can cause itching there.

Symptoms: See clinical signs.

Description: Otodectes cynotis is a type of mite that lives on the surface of the skin, rather than tunneling into it. The mite is able to reproduce in the ears and live approximately two months. They cause an intense hypersensitive reaction that leads to severe itching in many animals. Some animals cause a significant amount of trauma to their ears by constant scratching. Ear mites are very contagious. In addition, they can migrate to other parts of the body and cause itching.

Diagnosis: Diagnosis commonly is made by using a cotton-tipped applicator to take a sample of the debris in the ear canals. The material then is viewed in mineral oil under a microscope to determine if mites are present. Other ways of diagnosing ear mites include looking into the ears with an otoscope to identify mites visually. The light from the otoscope warms up the mites so that they can be seen crawling around. Skin scrapings, performed by using a dull blade gently to scrape the skin, sometimes are helpful to determine the presence of mites on other parts of the body. The material then is evaluated under the microscope.

Prognosis: With proper treatment, ear mites can be cured. However, all animals that have been exposed to the infected animal must be treated as well, since mites are highly contagious.

Treatment: Treatment starts with a very thorough cleaning of the ears to get all the debris and wax out of the canals. If the ears are not properly cleaned, mites can survive the treatment because the wax and debris protects them. There are several medications available for the treatment of ear mites. Some contain miticide only; others will have antibiotics and/or a medication to help break down wax and debris.

A typical treatment involves applying a topical medication directly into the ears for several weeks; each animal may not respond to certain medications, so treatments may vary. The use of flea sprays, powders, or topical preparations will be necessary to help prevent mites from re-infecting the ears. Consult with a veterinarian about the various medications that are available.

An alternative treatment involves using an injectable or oral medication called ivermectin. Although ivermectin is a highly effective and common treatment, this use is considered extra-label, and should NOT be used in certain breed of dogs, such as collies, Shetland sheepdogs, Old English sheepdogs, and any herding dogs or their crosses. Side effects in these breeds can lead to death. Ivermectin usually is very safe for cats, however, and can be especially useful in animals that are difficult to treat or that are outdoors and hard to catch daily.

Prevention: Effective prevention requires proper medical treatment of all animals that have mites, or that have been in contact with animals carrying mites. The use of an effective flea control product that stays on the animal for several days helps to control the spread of mites to other parts of the body. Disinfecting the environment with appropriate insecticides also is very helpful. Consult a veterinarian about the use of safe insecticides in the animal's environment.

It is particularly difficult to control the spread of mites in catteries and kennels because so many animals are housed together closely.