

## Anal Gland Issues in Dogs

**Presented By:**



# Healthy pets

With Dr. Karen Becker

***Anal glands in dogs and cats can be a recurrent, frustrating, and misunderstood issue. Dr. Karen Becker explains why so many pets have trouble with their anal glands, and why the common treatment may be causing more harm than good.***

Anal glands are little sacs that sit right inside of a dogs' & cats' rectum. They sit about 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock just inside of the anus, and they're designed to secrete really stinky material that contains pheromones. Pheromones are chemical messengers that help identify "who's who" in the pack. That's why dogs and cats sniff each other's butts, as the scent provides a lot of biochemical information that they need to communicate with one another.

For thousands of years, dogs and cats have existed in harmony with their anal glands. So the question is, to those of you who have anal gland issues with your pets: what's going on, and why do dogs and cats have recurrent anal gland problems?

In grooming schools during the 1940s and 1950s (*and even some "old school" programs today*), groomers were taught to express the anal glands. Emptying the anal sacs was considered to be a courtesy, but the downside is that pets were never meant to have these glands manually expressed.

The main reason pets have recurrent problems with their anal glands is unnecessary trauma. If every single day I told you to wake up and squeeze your submandibular lymph nodes or glands to express them, you could end up having glandular trauma. Or, if I told you to squeeze your salivary glands every single time you eat, you could end up with soft tissue trauma. The two tiny glands inside your pets' rectum have a tiny duct that leads out to the anus. When animals poop, feces come into the rectum, and as the colon expands, these glands squeeze a little of this stinky material on the feces, which provides biochemical markers for other animals. This is why your dog insists on stopping to smell poop when you're out on a walk. They're picking up on the anal gland material, which contains a lot of information on the dog that was there last. All of these systems are meant to work in harmony, however, if that little duct that drains the anal gland becomes swollen shut, all heck can break loose. The area can become very irritated and inflamed, and if those glands swell up and pinch off the outflow tract, there will be no porthole for the material to be secreted. So, when groomers get in there in an attempt to provide a service to you, it can actually create unnecessary trauma. Unnecessary trauma is the major reason animals have recurrent anal gland problems, so if your pets don't have anal gland problems, **TELL YOUR GROOMER TO PLEASE LEAVE THEM ALONE, AND NOT TO AUTOMATICALLY EXPRESS YOUR PET'S ANAL GLANDS!** If there's an underlying inflammatory condition or lowgrade infection in one or both anal glands, gentle manipulation should be given *only by a veterinarian* who's capable of recognizing how much pressure to apply.

The goal is to help the anal gland retrain its muscle tone so that the body can do its job on its own. The biggest issue I see at my practice, is that groomers have recurrently expressed anal glands once a month or so, whether the pet needs the service or not. When this is done, the muscle around the anal gland that naturally has good tone, ends up losing muscle tone. It's kind of like a balloon. When you buy a balloon it's small and tight, but when you blow it up and let the air out, the balloon never goes back to its original taut, small size. When your pet's body becomes dependent on groomers expressing their anal glands, muscle tone is lost. If muscle tone is lost through recurrent expression, **do not have your groomer automatically express the glands!** Instead, your veterinarian should check the glands on a regular basis and determine whether the glands are normal sized, and whether the duct is working properly. In that case, the best choice is to leave them alone!

## **INFLAMMATION OF THE GI TRACT AND OTHER ORGANS:**

The second major reason we often see recurrent anal gland issues is inflammation of the GI tract. Keep in mind that the rectum and the anus are the very last part of the gastrointestinal tract, and any underlying disease, or disease cascade that can influence the gastrointestinal tract, can also influence the anal glands. For instance, inflammatory bowel disease. If your pet has inflammation of the colon, the anal glands can be infected. If your pet has allergies, allergic gastritis or allergic colitis, that can also cause inflammation of the anal glands.

Anything that can cause soft stools, such as parasites, medications, and antibiotics, are also major risk factors for causing anal gland issues over time. This is because in part, the health of anal glands is based on a firm stool. When feces pass out of the rectum, it's the pressure of the firm stool against the colon wall that effectively expresses the anal glands as was naturally intended. If your pet's stools are recurrently soft, or if they have diarrhea over long periods of time, it could be a metabolic reason why recurrent anal gland issues can become a problem. In this case, the underlying cause of the soft stools and/or diarrhea must be addressed.

## **ALLERGIES CAN ALSO IRRITATE YOUR PET'S ANAL GLANDS:**

If your pet is sensitive to ragweeds, grasses, pollens, molds or other allergens in their environment, this can be a problem for their anal glands. All it takes is your pet sitting down outside for those allergens to transfer to the anus and cause overwhelming itching. Your dog may start to scoot, itch, become red and irritated, and even chew at its rectum, which can create the anal gland problem. So if you've got an allergenic pet, addressing the root cause of the allergies is a great way to secondarily address the anal gland problem.

## **ANAL GLANDS CAN ALSO BE IN THE WRONG SPOT:**

Some animals have anal glands that are placed deep and low inside of the rectum. In this case, even though there is healthy stool being passed out of the rectum, there's not enough pressure to the anal glands to effectively empty their contents during a bowel movement. In these very rare situations, these animals need to have anal gland expressions performed manually, because they're not capable of doing it on their own.

In extreme circumstances, the anal glands need to be surgically removed, but this is the very last resort. Surgical removal of anal glands falls under the surgical definition of a "salvage procedure", which means it can come with a host of complications. So, first and foremost, if you're having problems, identify what the root issue is. If your pet does have an ergonomic problem (*anal glands that are set abnormally deep*), then you can rely on expression, **through a trained professional**, to help provide relief to your pet.

## **THE BOTTOM LINE:**

***If your pet's anal glands are healthy, don't express!***

Please remember that if your pets don't have an underlying anal gland problem, leave them alone! Do not squeeze the anal glands! If your pets do have anal gland problems, identify whether it's a response due to unnecessary trauma, an inflammatory response, an allergic response, or a soft stool issue. Having your veterinarian address the underlying root cause of why your pets are dealing with a recurrent anal gland problem is the best choice to deal with this issue.

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