

MALASSEZIA (YEAST) INFECTIONS

Malassezia is a non-contagious yeast that can infect the skin, feet and ears. The appearance of infected skin varies from red/moist, scaly, oily/greasy skin, which will sometimes appear thick or leathery and can often darken in color (hyperpigmentation). In rare cases the skin can appear dry and flaky. These infections can occur anywhere on the body, but are most commonly seen under the feet, in folds (including face folds, lip folds and neck folds) and nail beds and can cause ear infections as well. Yeast infections are typically very itchy and uncomfortable. Healthy dogs may be carriers of this yeast, and it does not pose problems in most healthy dogs.

The odor and appearance of the skin and ear discharge varies between individuals and may appear similar to bacterial infections (which are treated with different medications). The diagnosis of yeast infections can not be made solely on appearance or odor. Yeast infections can only be diagnosed by performing cytology. This involves taking a sample from the surface of the affected area, applying it to a glass slide, applying specific stains to the slide and then viewing the slide under a microscope. The yeast are often readily visible, but special training is required for technicians and doctors to perform this type of microscopy. Yeast infections may occur along with bacterial infections. The use of antibiotics does not increase the risk of developing yeast infections as it does in humans.

Malassezia spp. are the most common yeast seen in animals. Other types of yeast may be seen but less frequently. Normal animals rarely develop yeast infections, but they can if the skin is injured or if there is inflammation.

Yeast infections are usually SECONDARY to some other skin problem (underlying problem).

Allergic animals who scratch and have inflamed skin are very susceptible to yeast infections. These allergies can include:

- 1) atopy/allergy to airborne substances (pollen, dust, molds)
- 2) flea allergy
- 3) food allergy
- 4) other parasites

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The other important factor is when the animals cannot fight off the infection normally. This may be due to a number of factors such as:

- 1) drug induced (i.e. corticosteroid use)
- 2) hormonal (i.e. hypothyroidism, hyperadrenocorticism)
- 3) keratinization abnormalities
- 4) parasitic (i.e. demodicosis, scabies, fleas)
- 5) immune mediated disorders (i.e. pemphigus, lupus)
- 6) neoplasia
- 7) metabolic disorders
- 8) immune deficiency or depression

Treatment for yeast infections can also vary. Correction or control of the underlying problem is the primary goal. Most animals with yeast infections will need to be treated with either topical or oral antifungal medications. The length of treatment can vary from 3 weeks to several months. Topical therapy (using ointments, drops and shampoos) may be helpful in some cases where the yeast infection is localized to a small area.

If oral medications are used, certain precautions may need to be taken. Pets must be healthy before using oral antifungal medications because some of these medications are metabolized by the liver. In some cases blood work needs to be done to check liver enzymes prior to starting these medications, and if they are used long-term, these values must be checked regularly. Some of these medications may also interact with other drugs, so it is important that the doctor be aware of all medications that your pet is taking. These medications may cause nausea in some individuals. If this is noted, then stop the medications and call us or your regular veterinarian.