

Examining and Medicating the Ears of Your Cat

Source: Washington State University – College of Veterinary Medicine

<https://www.vetmed.wsu.edu/outreach/Pet-Health-Topics/categories/procedures/cats/examining-and-medicating-the-ears-of-your-cat>

This information is not meant to be a substitute for veterinary care. Always follow the instructions provided by your veterinarian.

In the photographs below, unless otherwise noted, the cat is facing with his nose pointing to your left.

Variations on these instructions exist.



Ear cleaning and medicating can be messy, so cover good clothes and work on a surface that is easy to clean.

Most cats do not like having their ears cleaned. Some cats will happily sit in your lap or on a table while you clean or medicate their ears but many require some form of restraint.

To hold your cat in your lap to place ear medications, drape your left forearm across the cat's body to keep him/her in your lap. Hold the head with your left hand using your left thumb to press the ear flap against the head with the ear canal open.

Hold the medication in your right hand.

The ear has 3 major parts:

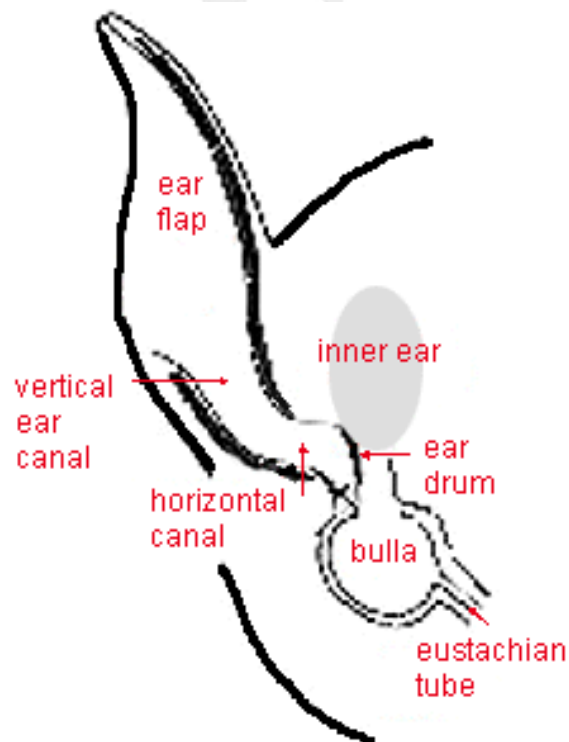
- outer ear
- middle ear
- inner ear

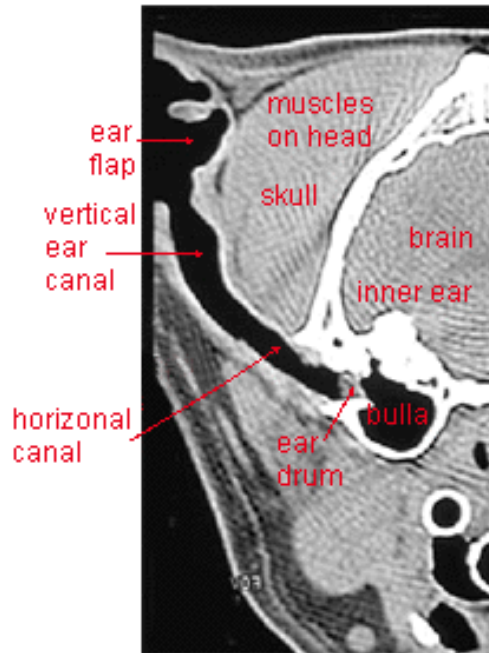
The **outer ear** consists of the ear flap (also called the pinna) which is usually upright in cats with the exception of specific breeds such as the Scottish fold cat whose ears are folded over. The ear flap funnels sound into the ear canal. Unlike humans that have a very short ear canal, dogs and cats have a long narrow ear canal that makes almost a 90 degree bend as it travels to the deeper parts of the ear.

The outer ear canal is separated from the **middle ear** by a thin membrane called the eardrum or tympanic membrane. The ear drum is very fragile and can be damaged by ear disease or during ear cleaning. The middle ear consists of 3 small bones, an air filled cavity called the bulla and a thin tube (the eustachian tube) leading from the bulla to the back of the mouth.

The inner ear connects to the brain and contains nerves and centers for balance and hearing. The following picture shows a diagram of the right ear as it appears if you are looking at the cat's head from the front.

Cats do not have as many ear problems as do dogs.





A CT scan of the head



The outer ear flap is usually covered with fur.



If the ear is itchy, scratching may result in hair loss on the ear flap or at the base of the ear. Severe scratching may also lead to tears at the edges of the ear.



The inner side of the ear should be a healthy pink color. A small amount of black discharge may be observed in some cats. A large amount of black wax is often seen in cats with ear mites.

Ear infections may result in:

- redness
- discharge
- odor
- head shaking
- ear scratching
- rubbing ears on the floor or other surfaces



If the "non-furred", inner side of the ear flap contains lots of fur at the opening to the ear canal, a few hairs at a time can be plucked using a tweezers or hemostat. Do not insert the instrument into the ear canal. Lots of hair at the opening to the ear canal reduces air flow into the ear. Good air flow is important to maintaining a healthy ear.

Cat ears usually are not very hairy and plucking is usually not necessary.



Ear cleaning can be accomplished with the following supplies:

- ear wash solution
- cotton balls
- a tweezers or hemostat to pluck hair
- q tips may be used if used properly

Ear cleaning solutions contain various chemicals and may contain drying agents. Check with your veterinarian regarding which product to use and how often to use it. **Excessive ear cleaning can be damaging to the ear.**



The ear wash solution is squeezed into the ear canal. A few drops of ear wash should be applied to the inside of the ear flap, then the tip of the ear wash bottle should be inserted a few millimeters into the ear canal, marked by the yellow X to place some of the wash solution down the ear canal. Be careful not to tightly force the tip of the bottle into the ear canal as forceful squeezing of the bottle with the bottle wedged into the ear canal could rupture the ear drum.

The cat will usually shake its head as soon as the wash is inserted into the ear, shaking out much of the solution.



Massage the base of the ear to distribute the wash solution throughout the ear canal. Cats usually like this part.



Use cotton balls to remove discharge from the inner side of the ear flap.



You can also use q tips to clean the inner side of the ear flap

BUT...



DON'T stick q tips into the ear any further than you can see.

Deep placement of a q tip can rupture the ear drum or can pack wax and other debris further into the ear canal, preventing medications from getting to the deeper parts of the ear canal.



Ear medications may contain several different drugs and may be ointments (pictured on the left and in insert) or drops (pictured on the right).

Ear medications are most effective when placed in a clear ear. If they are placed on top of ear wax or other debris they will not be as effective. Your veterinarian will give you instructions, if cleaning is needed before ear medications are given.

Sometimes your veterinarian will recommend a thorough ear exam under sedation or anesthesia if:

- the cat will not allow cleaning awake
- it is suspected that a foreign body such as plant material is inside the ear canal
- the veterinarian needs to collect samples from the ear for cytology or culture



Whether using ointments or drops, place a small amount of medication on the inside of the ear flap and the prescribed number of drops into the ear canal. The tip of the ointment tube or dropper should be placed a few millimeters into the ear canal to assure that the medication goes into the ear canal. If the ear is stretched away from the head, the bend in the ear canal will straighten so that the medication can be deposited in the entire ear canal.

DO NOT place the long neck of the ointment tube as far as it will go down the ear canal as you could puncture the ear drum with it.



Massage the base of the ear to help distribute the medication into the ear canal.

If the infection is severe or involves the middle and inner ear, oral medications may also be prescribed. Surgery is sometimes necessary if the infection is in the middle ear.

Washington State University assumes no liability for injury to you or your pet incurred by following these descriptions or procedures.

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