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EAR MITES

What are ear mites?

The ear mite (*Otodectes cynotis*) is a surface living mite that lives on cats, dogs, rabbits and ferrets. It is usually found in the ear canal but it can also live on the skin surface. The entire ear mite life cycle takes place on animals. Cats become infested by direct contact with an infested animal. The mite is just visible to the naked eye and can be seen as a white speck moving against a dark background.

What effect do ear mites have on cats?

Ear mites are the most common cause of feline ear disease. They are the second most common ectoparasite found on cats; the most common is the flea. Infestations are most common in kittens and young cats although cats of any age can be affected. Clinical signs of infestation vary in severity from one cat to another and include combinations of:

- Ear irritation causing scratching at the ears or head shaking
- A dark waxy discharge from the ear
- Areas of hair loss resulting from self-trauma - scratching or excessive grooming
- A crusted rash
- Aural hematoma - a large blood blister cause by rupture of small blood vessels between the skin and cartilage of the ear usually on the inner aspect - caused by scratching at the ears

Skin lesions most frequently affect the ear and surrounding skin but uncommonly other areas of the body may be affected.

How are ear mite infestations diagnosed?

Typical clinical signs with a history of contagion between cats or cats and dogs would suggest the involvement of ear mites. Ear mites cause over 50% of feline ear disease. However other conditions can result in very similar clinical signs.

A veterinarian makes the diagnosis by seeing the mite. This is usually straightforward and may be done either by examination of the cat's ears with an otoscope or by microscopic examination of discharge from the ear. If the ears are very sore, the cat may need to be sedated to allow the ears to be properly examined and treated.

How can I get rid of ear mites from my cat?

Three steps are required to successfully treat ear mites:

- Treat the ears of all affected and susceptible pets
- Treat the skin of all affected and susceptible pets
- Treat the indoor environment because the mite is capable of limited survival off pets

Your veterinarian will advise you about which insecticidal products are suitable. There are several ear medications licensed for the treatment of ear mites. There are no products licensed for use on the house or on an animal's skin but many products licensed for flea control are effective.

Your veterinarian may ask you to continue the treatment regime for at least 21 days after which he may check the cat to ensure that the mites have been eliminated.

Do ear mites affect people?

Ear mites may cause an itchy rash on susceptible people if there are infested pets in the household. Eradication of the mites from the pets will cure the problem.