



Honey's Canine Health Guide N°1

ANAL GLANDS

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A quick overview

Unlike humans, but like other carnivorous mammals, dogs (and cats) have anal sacs *aka* anal glands. These are small, paired glands located on either side of the rectum. The lining of the sacs contain glands that produce a dark liquid which can only be described as one of the strongest smelling substances in the world. This substance is emptied into the rectum through ducts that lead to the inner edge of the anus. When a stool is passed, it squeezes the sacs so that a few drops of the fluid coat the stool. This is the reason why dogs are so keen to smell each other anuses and stools (or bums and poos in plain English). The anal gland fluid is how each dog leaves his own unique scent-based visiting card.

In most dogs, this system works impeccably, and there is no need for you (or your groomer or vet) to go anywhere near the anal glands. You don't even need to know that they exist. It is a common misconception that 'checking' or expressing the anal glands is a part of good grooming or healthcare. It isn't. They should be left alone unless there is a reason to think they are causing a health issue.

Anal gland disease

It happens occasionally – much more commonly in dogs than in cats – that the glands, for whatever reason, don't empty properly. If the glands become over-filled and blocked, the dog will feel acutely uncomfortable and will typically scoot on the floor or spin around to lick his or her anus. If you see this behaviour a vet should be consulted. You should also contact your vet immediately if your dog is badly constipated as this can be very serious if untreated.

If the anal glands are impacted and sore, your vet can generally express them quickly and easily, which will bring immediate and immense relief. While it is important, of course, that this is done to relieve a deeply uncomfortable dog, it is equally important *not* to touch the glands unless there is a reason to do so. Every time the anal glands are manually expressed, it inflames them, which can lead to a vicious circle of inflamed and over-producing glands that come to need regular manual emptying. This contributes to further inflammation, and eventually the natural balance is completely compromised, and the glands no longer empty into the rectum with each stool.

If the impaction and constant inflammation of the glands leads to infection, the condition becomes acutely painful and requires antibiotic treatment. In some cases, an abscess forms, and it is necessary to clean and flush the area under general anaesthesia. Some dogs end up with anal glands so scarred and destroyed that they are surgically removed. This is quite a complicated surgical procedure that carries a small risk of permanent faecal incontinence due to damage to the anal sphincter, a situation that often could have been avoided.

The cause of the problem

There are multiple theories as to why some dogs suffer so badly from inflamed anal glands, while others never feel a thing (many carers are completely unaware that the glands even exist, as they generally cause no symptoms at all). It is easy to be overzealous, potentially creating a problem that wasn't there to begin with. The anal glands don't need manual emptying just because they are half full. They don't have to be empty. They have a job to do and generally do it best when we don't interfere. If the glands are bulging, inflamed and painful, then it may make sense to get them expressed. If not, leave them alone.

One theory is that inflamed anal glands, much like inflamed ears, may be an expression of an underlying allergic problem. A tendency to soft stools may be the main problem for most of these dogs. If the stools are too soft to express the glands as they pass through the rectum (whether during a brief period of diarrhoea or over a longer term), the secretions will accumulate, and problems may follow. Seeing how crumbly hard the stools become when dogs are fed a more natural diet of raw meat and bones, it is easy to suspect that our highly processed and mainly carbohydrate-based dog foods, when they pass through the dog, simply come out too soft to work as nature intended.

Treatment

In an acute situation, relieving the pressure by emptying the glands is the important thing. If infection is present, your vet will probably also recommend antibiotic treatment, as either a cream, tablets or both.

It can sometimes be tricky to get the glands to empty naturally again following an impaction or infection. Once the glands are inflamed, they definitely tend to overproduce, starting a vicious circle of inflammation that necessitates intervention that adds to the inflammation... and on it goes. Previous infections may have caused scarring and narrowing of the ducts that empty into the rectum, making it hard to get back on track.

Some dogs, having experienced pain, may become more reluctant and cautious when it comes to defecating (or pooing, as you prefer). It may simply be that whatever caused the first case of impaction has not been resolved. In any case, anal-sac problems tend to recur and often become chronic. If you find yourself in this situation, there are several steps you can take before resorting to having the glands surgically removed, a procedure that should be kept as the absolute last option.

The most important step is to change the diet. Prevention is always easier than cure, but even if you already face chronic anal sac problems, it is still worth seeing what can be achieved through a simple diet change. There are two reasons for this. Firm stools are a prerequisite for proper anal sac function, and no one has firmer stools than the dog on a raw meat and bone diet. Secondly, if your dog suffers from an allergy (whether to storage mites in dry food or to certain foods), a diet change can address this.

Homeopathy and acupuncture are both excellent at treating chronic inflammation and can make a real difference in cases of chronic anal-sac problems.

Osteopathy can address tensions or imbalances in the pelvic area that may have caused the problem in the first place and are certainly likely to be present after one or more painful episodes. An osteopathic assessment is therefore always a good idea for any dog that has suffered more than one episode of blocked anal glands.

The role of diet

Many dogs that have anal gland problems experience a marked improvement on a raw diet, as the food is very digestible and the raw bone firms up the faeces. This means that the dog has to strain to pass faeces, and this action empties the glands on a regular basis, leading to less problems with blockage.

If you live in the UK, Honey's Health Team will be delighted to devise a special dietary plan for your dog designed to prevent and tackle anal gland issues. Feeding a natural diet couldn't be easier and we can do all the hard work for you – working out exactly what your dog should eat each day (and how much, of course), explaining what to buy and how to prepare it. If you would prefer, and you will be under no obligation, we will be happy to supply the food you need and deliver it straight to your door.

Free expert advice

At Honey's we will be delighted to provide you with unlimited, free advice – we don't mind if you never, ever plan to become a customer. Moreover, you can also take full advantage of our Health Team (which includes vets, veterinary nurses and other experts) free of charge. We will be pleased to show you how to make your own food, too. We maintain a list of holistic vets, who we are happy to recommend.

To find a veterinary homeopath: www.bahvs.com

To find a veterinary acupuncturist: www.ivas.com

To find a veterinary osteopath: www.associationofanimalosteopaths.com



Free book

If you want to know about canine health and nutrition, then please visit our website and download our free book *Honey's Natural Feeding Handbook for Dogs*, or email us and if you are in the UK, we will pop a free copy in the post.

General information about raw feeding

The connection between good health and diet is well established in humans. We know that if we eat fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, not too much dairy and moderate quantities of animal protein we will live longer, healthier lives. We also know that if we eat processed food or food containing chemical additives, too much fat and too much sugar we will live shorter, considerably less healthy lives.

In fact, it is well proven that everything from allergies to heart conditions and from skin complaints to cancer is caused by a poor diet. What holds good for humans and human food holds good for dogs and dog food. Dogs that eat a natural diet live longer, healthier lives. The problem is that we have lost touch with what the natural, correct diet for a dog actually is. Instead, we feed them the canine equivalent of junk food.

As a result, we are seeing more and more illness in our dogs and they are leading shorter and shorter lives. The development of all sorts of genetic conditions may also be attributable to generations of dogs eating a harmful diet.

Happily, the situation can be quickly and effortlessly corrected. We know what a species appropriate diet for dogs is and it couldn't be easier to replicate a 'wild' diet using 'tame' ingredients. Furthermore, as those who have switched their dogs to a natural diet will testify, the results can be amazing.

Benefits include a glossy coat, healthy skin, lean muscle tone, robust immune system, sweet-smelling breath, healthy teeth and gums, increased energy, better digestion and a strong heart. Dogs eating a raw food diet can be expected to live longer and to suffer less illness and disease. Indeed, if your dog has any health issues now (even minor problems such as allergies, dry skin, bad breath and what the Americans refer to, euphemistically, as 'gas') it is quite likely that a switch to a raw food diet will clear them up.



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Parts of this text are revised extracts from *The Complete Book of Cat and Dog Health* (Hubble & Hattie 2019) by Dr Lise Hansen. www.hubbleandhattie.com

The advice and information contained in this fact sheet is for guidance only. The Honey's Health Team (vets, veterinary nurses and other experts) is here to help you in any way we can. However, nothing can replace a physical examination by a vet or other qualified professional.