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A MONTHLY GUIDE TO NATURAL DOG CARE & TRAINING

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By C. J. Puotinen

Oh, the smell! Anyone who's ever been in the same room when a frightened dog "blows" her anal glands or a veterinarian manually expresses them will never forget the malodorous experience. And anyone whose dog has suffered from impacted, infected, or abscess

It's wise for dog owners to be aware of the problems that can arise with these glands, so they can seek appropriate remedies on their dog's behalf.

Where the problem lies

Dogs have two anal glands or sacs, one on each side of the anus, between the internal and external anal sphincter muscles. Technically, it's the anal gland that produces fluid and the anal sac that stores it, but most veterinarians refer to either or both when they mention anal glands or anal sacs. Also called scent glands, these organs produce a brown or yellow liquid that is usually thin but which can thicken to a paste-like consistency. In small dogs, the glands are normally the size of a pea, while in large dogs they're the size and shape of a kidney bean. At least, unless something goes awry.

Dogs, wolves, and other canids aren't alone in having anal glands; cats, weasels, skunks, and various territory-marking mammals have them as well. Except for skunks, which routinely use their scent glands for defense, most animals release the contents of their anal glands only when they defecate or when extreme fear causes involuntary muscle contractions that expel fluid from the anal sacs. Anal gland secretions are what make dogs smell fascinating, at least to other dogs. As dogs circle and inspect each other's hind ends, they're savoring anal sac fragrances.

In healthy dogs whose diets contain sufficient fiber or roughage, anal glands do nothing more than give fecal matter its distinctive fragrance. As stool is passed, the sphincter muscles squeeze the anal sacs and force their

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Dogs who "butt scoot" on the carpet may be giving you not-to-be-ignored information about a potentially serious condition: overly full or impacted anal glands.

contents onto the stool's surface. But when sphincter muscles don't exert sufficient pressure, or if something blocks the flow of fluid, problems develop.

Signs of trouble

The most common early sign of overly full, blocked, or impacted anal glands is scooting. Dragging her rear end over carpets, grass, or other rough surfaces is your dog's attempt to stimulate the release of anal fluid. Affected dogs may also lick or bite the anal area in an effort to relieve their discomfort.

Abscesses are boils, pockets of pus under the skin surface caused by bacterial infections that produce heat, inflammation, swelling, and acute pain. If your dog whimpers or cries while attempting to defecate; if there is blood, pus, or swelling close to the anus; or if he is in obvious pain when sitting or moving, he may have an abscessed anal gland.

In many cases, impacted and even abscessed anal glands can be treated successfully at home, but it's always a good idea, especially if you're not yet familiar with anal gland problems, to have your veterinarian take a look. Some abscesses drain on their own while others need treatment.

Infected anal glands may require oral antibiotics, lancing, flushing, or other medical attention. For example, open channels or fistulas around the anus can result from infected anal glands, making the condition difficult to cure.

In severe cases, infected sacs can be so painful that the dog requires anesthesia before the sacs can be treated. Emptied anal sacs can be rinsed with a disinfecting liquid from an irrigation syringe and then filled with antibacterial ointment, a treatment that may have to be repeated several times. The most serious cases are resolved by the anal glands' surgical removal.

Finding the cause

No one knows why some dogs are predisposed to having impacted or infected anal glands, but overweight and physically inactive dogs tend to have more problems than slender, physically fit dogs. In obese dogs, fat skin folds may block the pores and prevent them from draining. It may also be more difficult for obese dogs to groom themselves and encourage natural drainage.

Small dogs are more at risk than large dogs, in part because their small glands have tiny openings. But even giant breeds can develop anal gland problems.

One of the most important factors in anal gland health is diet. According to Juliette de Bairacli Levy (see "Grandmother Nature," July 2006) in her Complete Herbal Handbook for the Dog and Cat, most sufferers of anal gland problems are overfed pets. "The trouble would not occur," she says, "if dogs were fed a natural diet which always included sufficient roughage."

Richard Pitcairn, DVM, PhD, lists three main causes of anal gland problems in his Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs and Cats. The first is overcrowding at home, which creates inadequate space for exercise and exploration as well as frustrated attempts to establish a territory. The second is constipation or infrequent bowel movements, especially as a result of inadequate outdoor exercise. Third, he blames toxicity resulting from poor diet and inadequate exercise. In the last cases, skin disorders and ear infections may occur as well.

To repair these problems, Dr. Pitcairn recommends improving the dog's diet and providing adequate exercise, the opportunity to go outside and have frequent bowel movements, and psychological "space." Many holistic veterinarians recommend a raw diet that contains either the

roughage of vegetables or raw bones. Opinions differ as to whether vegetables should be served in large chunks or pureed, how much vegetable matter should be mixed with meat, and whether bones should be whole or ground, but any of these additions can provide bulk that stimulates anal glands.

Levy recommends feeding raw meat in large chunks, never ground, explaining that ground meat requires little exercise on the part of the stomach and digestive tract. Foods that are too soft or too easily digested can contribute to anal gland problems.

Another helpful addition to the canine diet is coconut. Now that coconut has become a popular health food (see "Crazy about Coconut Oil," October 2005), most natural foods markets and several online retailers carry coconut oil, unsweetened shredded dried coconut, and coconut flour.

Coconut oil is especially helpful to dogs with anal gland problems because it lubricates the intestines, acts as a stool softener, and contains medium-chain fatty acids that kill yeast, fungi, viruses, harmful bacteria, and parasites, making the dog who ingests coconut oil every day a less likely candidate for anal gland infections. Start with small amounts and gradually increase to about 1 teaspoon of coconut oil per 10 pounds of body weight, which is 1 tablespoon per 30 pounds, per day.

"In addition to coconut oil," says Bruce Fife, ND, coconut authority and author of *Coconut Cures* and other books, "coconut flour and shredded coconut are very good for dogs with anal gland problems because they are excellent sources of fiber. You can soak coconut flour or shredded coconut in water, broth, or other liquid so that it's well hydrated, then add it to your dog's food. Start with small amounts of coconut flour or dried shredded coconut and gradually increase to about 1 teaspoon coconut flour or 2 teaspoons dried shredded coconut per 30 pounds of body weight. Soak it well before mixing it with the dog's main meal."

Soaking is also recommended for more familiar sources of fiber, such as wheat bran and powdered psyllium husks. Any fiber supplement can contribute to constipation and intestinal blockages if given without sufficient fluid. The easiest way to prevent problems is to soak bran or psyllium overnight or for several hours so that it doesn't absorb fluids as it moves through the digestive tract.

Juliette de Bairacli Levy recommends soaking 2 tablespoons fenugreek seeds in 1 cup warm water, letting it stand for 24 hours, then giving the liquid as a drink and mixing the seeds into the dog's food. All of Levy's recommendations are appropriate for dogs weighing 40 to 50 pounds. Use more for large and giant breeds, less for small and toy breeds.

Another addition that seems to work well is dried fruit, such as prunes, apricots, or figs, which can be added to the dog's meals. For large dogs, try 2 or 3 dried prunes, apricots, or figs per day; for small dogs try 1 or 2 every other day. These dried fruits have a mild laxative effect, but their main benefit is their fiber. Like other high-fiber foods, they increase the size of fecal matter, producing larger stools that exercise the anal glands and help prevent their blockage. For dogs eating dry kibble, it's a good idea to soak dried fruit before adding it to food.

English Setter breeder Joan Mizer in England told canine nutritional consultant Linda Arndt of Albany, Indiana, about a Rottweiler whose anal glands were chronically impacted until the dog's owner started giving him three pitted prunes daily. "After that," said Mizer, "the dog never again required anal gland emptying." When Mizer heard about the Rottweiler from her veterinarian 10 years ago, she had two English Setters whose anal glands had to be emptied frequently. She started adding three dried prunes to their food once a week and they haven't had an anal gland problem since.

“It is a lot easier to scatter a few prunes on food than to physically empty anal glands,” she said. “Friends who have tried giving prunes to their dogs have experienced the same happy results.”

The only exception to the dried fruit recommendation is the dog who suffers from a systemic yeast infection, such as candidiasis. Linda Arndt warns that many dogs diagnosed with allergies are in fact suffering from yeast overgrowth, a problem made worse by foods containing sugar, which includes all dried and fresh fruit. Sources of fiber other than fruit are recommended for dogs with chronic allergies, frequent ear infections, and other yeast infection symptoms.

Additional recommendations from holistic health experts include adding finely minced wheat grass or other green herbs to the diet at the rate of 1 teaspoon per 10 pounds of body weight (1 tablespoon per 30 pounds) per day. Alternatively, you can feed chopped vegetables, such as carrots or celery; add aloe vera juice or gel to food at the rate of 1 teaspoon per 20 pounds of body weight per day; or add a chlorophyll supplement to the dog’s food according to label directions.

Express (the glands) yourself

Even in dogs who have never shown symptoms, anal glands should be checked periodically just to be sure that everything looks normal. Veterinarians are used to expressing canine anal glands, which is a smelly but simple procedure. If it’s ever necessary for your dog, have your vet show you how. This simple procedure can be done at home on anal glands that are full and not releasing fluid on their own, but do not attempt to express anal glands that are painfully infected or abscessed.

Expressing impacted anal glands is often easier after the area has been treated several times with a hot herbal compress or fomentation (see next section).

Professional groomers often perform this task when they are bathing the dog, to reduce the potential for creating a smelly mess, especially on long-coated dogs.

When you have experience with this task, you’ll find that it may be most efficient and clean to hold a warm, damp washcloth or gauze pad over the area as you apply pressure to the glands. This is so the expressed fluid can be easily wiped away and won’t squirt out and land on you – which is definitely an experience you won’t forget. But when you are a beginner at this task, the washcloth can make it difficult to see if you are squeezing in the right place, and whether anything is coming out! In this case, have gauze or cotton at the ready – and consider putting on some safety goggles or glasses. Really!

Raise the dog’s tail and take a look. If the dog’s anus was the center of the face of a clock, the glands would be located at around the numbers five and seven. The idea is to gently palpate the area with your thumb and forefinger to locate the glands. Think of them as small grapes embedded in the dog’s flesh; you want to squeeze the juice out of them, without expelling the “grapes” themselves. Firmly press your thumb and forefinger into the dog’s flesh, outside of the area where the glands are located, and slowly squeeze the fingers together. If you do it right, you’ll immediately see a thick fluid expressed on or around the dog’s anus. Wipe away any expressed fluid with the tissue, gauze, or cotton. Check the fluid for blood or pus, either of which indicates an infection.

Again, it may be easiest to have your veterinarian or groomer show you how to do this. And you definitely want to seek the attention of your vet if the glands appear badly infected or abscessed. Karen Doyle of Dogs Gone Grooming in Suffern, New York, has dealt with thousands of anal glands in her 26 years as a dog groomer. “I didn’t learn how to express anal glands in grooming school because they didn’t teach it,” she says. “I learned by doing it on my own dogs. But even

though it's a simple procedure, it isn't something I do routinely. With small dogs, impacted anal glands aren't usually serious, but whenever I see impacted anal glands in a large breed dog, especially on two consecutive visits, I suggest a visit to the veterinarian to find out what's going on.

"You can get acquainted with your dog's anal glands just by checking them from time to time," she continues. "Lift the tail, take a look, and gently touch the area. You'll be able to see at a glance whether the hair looks worn or bald from frantic licking or biting, and you can tell by touch whether the anal sacs are full or empty. Pay attention to whether the area is hot to the touch, looks inflamed or swollen, is obviously causing discomfort, or produces a thick rather than thin discharge. These are all symptoms that need attention." **Herbal treatments**

Juliette de Bairacli Levy's favorite way to relieve a dog's impacted anal glands is to apply herbs internally and externally.

Brew dandelion tea using leaves and/or flowers, she says, and add this to the dog's food and water as often as the dog will accept it. To brew the tea, use 1 teaspoon dried or 1 tablespoon fresh dandelion per cup of boiling water, cover, and let stand until cool.

Fomentations are hot compresses, made by brewing and straining a strong herbal tea. When applied to impacted or abscessed anal glands, they loosen, soften, and stimulate the glands and their contents, helping glands flow on their own. For most dogs, fomentations produce immediate relief from discomfort. Impacted anal glands may immediately begin to drain, or applying another fomentation several hours later may release trapped fluid.

Fomentations can help abscessed anal glands by encouraging the abscess to come to a head, burst open on its own, and drain. To prepare a fomentation, add 1 tablespoon dried herbs or 2 tablespoons fresh herbs to 1 cup boiling water, cover, and let steep for 10 to 15 minutes. If desired, add 1 tablespoon unrefined sea salt, which has its own healing properties.

Pour the hot tea into a bowl. When the tea is cool enough to touch without burning yourself but still very warm, saturate a clean washcloth or other absorbent fabric. Wring it out slightly so that it doesn't drip. If necessary, hold the washcloth open and exposed to the air to let it cool slightly. Test it on the inside of your wrist to be sure it isn't too hot. Fold the fabric in half and in half again. Hold the hot, wet cloth in place for three to five minutes, or until it begins to cool. Don't press hard, but apply just enough pressure to keep the fabric from shifting. Remove, soak the cloth again, and reapply for another three to five minutes.



It's all a little embarrassing, but remember: If it solves the problem and prevents the need for a painful surgery -- one that does not always have the best results -- then holding an herb-soaked washcloth on your dog's bottom is a good thing!

Dr. Pitcairn recommends applying hot calendula fomentations twice a day for three days or longer. Other holistic health experts recommend hot chamomile, stinging nettle, lavender, red clover, or yarrow fomentations. Like calendula, these dried herbs are available in most health food stores.

For anal gland abscesses, add a teaspoon of coconut oil, 1 drop of lavender essential oil, and/or several drops of grapefruit seed extract to any of these hot teas. All of these additions have disinfecting properties. Obviously, if your dog has a really painful abscess, this treatment may not be appropriate. Use a fomentation or hot compress only if your dog is comfortable with it.

Once an abscess begins to drain, the area can be left alone, treated with a warm or cool compress, or sprayed with an herbal tea or with a mixture of 1 cup medicinal-strength tea and 1 tablespoon unrefined sea salt. A tissue, gauze, or cotton ball can be used to gently wipe draining pus from below the affected area.

As mentioned, serious cases may require medical intervention. Consult your veterinarian about any abscess or impaction that does not respond to home treatment or that has progressed to an advanced stage.

Aromatherapy

Although many essential oils that have disinfecting properties are not recommended for use around mucous membranes (because they can irritate or cause pain), some essential oils, when diluted with carrier oils, are gentle enough for application to abscessed or impacted anal glands.

The secret is to use a therapeutic-quality essential oil that has both disinfecting and soothing properties, such as lavender or sweet marjoram essential oil, and to dilute it in a carrier oil that is quickly absorbed, such as jojoba, grapeseed, or sunflower oil. Hydrosols or “flower waters” are produced during steam distillation, and they combine minute traces of essential oil with the distilled plants’ water-soluble constituents, making them safe and effective for pet use.

When used as a disinfecting hydrosol, essential oils that can otherwise irritate mucous membranes, such as tea tree or oregano, can be safely sprayed on the area to help heal the infection. (For instructions and recommended resources, see our aromatherapy series, published in the December 2004, January 2005, April 2005, and August 2005 issues.)

Jake’s Canine Remedy, a topical spray developed by aromatherapist Frances Fitzgerald Cleveland, can be sprayed onto abscessed, infected anal glands. In addition to helping clear infection, inflammation, and itchiness, its essential oils have analgesic properties that help relieve pain. “If one of my dogs had abscessed anal glands,” she says, “I would definitely use it.”

Homeopathy

For abscessed or infected anal glands, Dr. Pitcairn, founder of the Academy of Veterinary Homeopathy and a classically trained homeopath, recommends Belladonna 6C. “Give one or two pellets every four hours for a total of three treatments,” he recommends. “Give no food for 10 minutes before and after treatment. No further homeopathic treatment will be needed for the next 24 hours. If your dog is not noticeably improved by then, give Silicea 30C only once, providing no food for one hour before and one hour after treatment. The Belladonna helps with the initial inflammation and Silicea promotes the discharge of pus and encourages healing.”

An ounce of prevention

Anyone who has had to deal with anal gland problems knows that preventing anal gland problems is well worth the investment of time and effort. With the simple methods described here, you can help your dog enjoy a comfortable life free from the pain and discomfort of impacted or infected anal glands.

A long-time contributor to WDJ and author of The Encyclopedia of Natural Pet Care, Natural remedies for Dogs and Cats, and other books, C. J. Puotinen lives in New York with her husband, a Lab and a tabby cat.