

Otitis Media in Cats

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Otitis media is an infection of the middle ear. The most frequent causes of otitis media in cats are:

- 1) bacterial migration up the Eustachian tube
- 2) extension of otitis externa past the eardrum into the bulla
- 3) polyp

The Eustachian tube drains normal secretions from the middle ear bulla into the back of the throat. This tube can become inflamed during an upper respiratory infection. The inflamed Eustachian tube does not allow fluid to drain normally from the middle ear. Bacteria migrate up the Eustachian tube and colonize the middle ear.

I most frequently see otitis media in cats that have recently had an upper respiratory infection.

Another cause of otitis media is an extension of otitis externa. The waxy debris from a chronic otitis externa causes maceration and eventual breakdown of the tympanic membrane. The tympanum attempts to repair itself, but in the process can actually trap exudate in the middle ear. The otitis externa often is cleared up in these cases, but the otitis media remains.

Signs of a middle ear infection include:

- 1) pain (avoiding being petted, reluctance to chew, flattened pinna)
- 2) opaque, erythematous, and sometimes bulging tympanic membrane
- 3) head tilt and/or Horner's syndrome
- 4) recurrent otitis externa

Sometimes a middle ear infection can spread to the inner ear. These cats have vestibular signs.

Many cases of otitis media can be treated medically. Pseudomonas is a frequent pathogen of the middle ear. Medical management of otitis media involves treating the otitis externa (if present) with topical antibiotic and steroid based on cytology. Administer oral antibiotic (marbofloxacin is an excellent choice) for 6 weeks. Administer an oral steroid for 4 weeks.

If the otitis media is particularly painful, or if the symptoms have not dramatically improved within 3 weeks, then myringotomy, culture and bulla flush are indicated. If a polyp is present it must be removed before the infection can be resolved.

The most common mistake in the treatment of otitis media is the premature discontinuation of oral antibiotic.

The tympanic membrane is sometimes quite difficult to assess. Often sedation is required. A video otoscope offers a magnified view of the tympanum, and this can be quite useful for the diagnosis of otitis media.