

## **Perianal Fistulas**

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Perianal fistula is an autoimmune condition characterized by painful, exudative, draining tracts around the anus. Affected dogs also experience colitis and painful bowel movements.

This is a condition that typically occurs in middle-aged dogs. German shepherd dogs are most commonly affected; although, perianal fistulas can be seen in other breeds, too.

Diagnosis is often made based on signalment, history and physical exam. The lesions are usually visually distinctive. When perianal fistulas are first developing, they may appear to be abscessation of the anal sac. However, time will quickly reveal that the lesions do not respond to therapy like an anal sac abscess does.

Several treatments exist for perianal fistulas. Not every treatment will be effective for every dog. Sometimes a combination of therapies is required in order to achieve lesion remission. Perianal fistulas can sometimes be cured with surgery. However, a cure is not guaranteed, and many affected dogs require lifelong medical therapy.

Non-surgical treatments for perianal fistulas include: cyclosporine, steroids, tacrolimus ointment, sulfasalazine and azathioprine. The time to healing is variable. Most cases will respond within 4 weeks, but some cases need 16 weeks to heal completely. Initial use of steroids usually speeds the healing process. Ideally, steroids will be used only temporarily, and other treatments with less potential for side effects will be used long-term to prevent recurrence of lesions.

Some dogs require a novel protein or hydrolyzed protein diet in addition to medication.

Perianal fistulas will always have bacterial overgrowth. However, many cases will heal without the use of antibiotics. Treatment should be directed at the underlying inflammation and antibiotics should only be used if healing is not progressing as expected.

Recurrence of fistulas may periodically occur and necessitate a temporary increase in medication dose or introduction of a short course of steroids.

