

ANAL GLANDS

Dogs and cats, as well many other small mammals, have a pair of glands located just under the skin on both sides of the rectum. These glands, commonly called "anal glands," are actually scent glands. Prior to domestication, these glands were used primarily for marking territory. In the domesticated species, they serve little to no practical purpose and are often the cause of great distress to many animals. The remainder of this article will discuss some of the more common problems associated with anal glands. In addition, a brief discussion of indications and pros/cons of surgical removal of the anal glands will be discussed.

COMMON PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH ANAL GLANDS

Compaction

Normal animals will express small amounts of the secretion in the anal glands with their bowel movements. In some animals, this does not occur and the anal gland will become full and cause discomfort for the animal.

The most common sign of an animal with anal gland compaction is scooting--the animal will place its butt on the ground and drag it in an effort to relieve the compaction. Manual expression of the anal gland is recommended for animals that are scooting. The frequency of expression will vary by animal. Some pets can need anal glands expressed as often as monthly and some will need expression once or twice per year.

Infection and abscess formation

Since the duct of the anal gland is located close to the external anal sphincter contamination with fecal bacteria is common. The infection resulting from bacterial contamination can be very painful.

Signs can include excessive scooting, excessive licking, swelling, fever, and pain. If the infection persists, the gland can rupture. Treatment includes manual expression of the gland and antibiotics. Surgical removal may be recommended to prevent additional problems.

Rupture

If an anal gland is compacted and infected, the infection will be unable to drain from the duct and can rupture through the skin overlying the anal gland.

Signs of a ruptured anal gland include evidence of a draining track with bloody or purulent (pus) discharge, scooting, licking, swelling, and pain. In some cases, the animal may lay around, hide, or have a decreased appetite. Treatment is often done under anesthesia and includes debriding the affected skin tissue, flushing and cleaning the area, placing a drain to ensure continued drainage, antibiotics, and pain medications. Surgical removal of the anal glands at a later date may be recommended to prevent relapse.

Tumor formation

Several tumors can form within an anal gland. The cause for tumor formation is often unknown but may be the result of chronic irritation. Dogs with small, early anal gland tumors may not show any signs of discomfort. Dogs with larger, more advanced tumors may scoot or lick excessively, have swelling in the area of the anal gland and/or have problems defecating.

Surgical removal of anal gland tumors is strongly recommended in the earliest stages of progression. If biopsy/histopathology of the tumor determines a malignancy, additional treatment, including chemotherapy and/or radiation, may be recommended. If the tumor is benign, surgery should be curative and additional treatment is often not necessary.

SURGICAL REMOVAL OF ANAL GLANDS

Anal glands can be removed to prevent problems or as a means of treatment. In many cases, anal gland removal should be considered for animals that need frequent expression (i.e. frequent compaction), for animals that have had a history of infections or anal gland rupture (abscesses), or for animals that have anal gland tumors. In all cases except for malignant anal gland tumors, surgery can allow for a 100% cure of anal gland problems.

Potential side effects of surgery can range from mild to severe. The mild complications can range from temporary post-operative pain, swelling, and drainage from the incision. These signs are often short lived and well controlled with medication. Moderate complications can include difficulty defecating post operatively and infection. The risk of infection is often higher than for other surgeries given the proximity to the anus and feces. Again, these problems can often be prevented or treated with the use of medication post operatively. Severe and less common complications can include anal sphincter damage and fecal incontinence. With careful surgical technique this can often be avoided.

As a means of preventing post operative complications antibiotics and pain medications will likely be prescribed. In addition, it is extremely important to not allow the patient to lick at or chew the sutures/incision line so usage of an e-collar will often be required until healing is complete. Animals that are allowed to lick at or chew their incisions will often have a higher chance of complications.