



# Grass Seeds and Your Dog

As we enter the warmer months of the year and the grasses that have been growing madly during springtime start to seed and dry off, local veterinarians see a sudden increase in the number of animals coming to the clinic with a variety of problems caused by grass seeds.

Grass seeds vary widely in size and shape. Although all of them have the potential for causing trouble, it is the seeds from grasses such as barley grass that often cause the greatest distress in our pet dogs. These particular type of seeds act a bit like a fishing hook – with a sharp tip that can pierce the skin and a wedge-shaped body that prevents the seed from coming back out.

Grass seeds can end up in your dog's eyes, ears, feet and even their lungs and throat. The symptoms that you see will largely depend on the location of the seed and its path through the body. Sometimes it will only be some local irritation, other times, infection and inflammation cause more severe symptoms.

## So What Should you be Looking for?

### **Grass Seeds in the FEET**

One of the most common places for grass seeds to affect dogs is the toes and feet. As the dog walks around, a seed may become embedded in their foot or get tangled up in the hair between their toes. At this stage, the seeds are easily removed, and there is no real damage done to the foot. However, if they are left unnoticed, the seeds can pierce through the skin and start moving through the tissues of your dog's foot, causing lameness and inflammation.

Bacteria and dirt that enter the foot with the grass seed can cause infection. Often the first sign of a grass seed is a hot, painful lump, or a weeping hole, most commonly where the toes join together.

Although some animals may not show any signs of a problem initially, your pet may become suddenly lame and be reluctant to bear weight on the sore foot, or they may lick or chew at the area as the infection and irritation become more pronounced. This licking and chewing can lead to secondary problems as the healthy skin nearby also becomes damaged, inflamed or infected.

Although a course of antibiotics may reduce the infection and the symptoms, the only way to truly resolve the problem is to remove the grass seed. This sounds easy, but can actually be quite tricky. The shape of the grass seed means it can only travel forwards, so it will gradually keep moving.

Sometimes the infection caused by the grass seed will burst out through the skin leaving a hole, but it is impossible to tell if the seed has actually come out, whether parts of the seed remain or whether the entire seed is still lodged in your dog's foot.

Your vet will need to probe the grass seed tract with a special tool. Although some dogs will tolerate this during the consultation, many require sedation for this to occur as the foot is just too painful to handle.

Sometimes, the vet will not find anything despite probing and flushing the tract and will send the dog home with a course of antibiotics. If the problem recurs as soon as the antibiotics finish either in the same location or a little further up the leg, chances are the seed is still there and will require further probing and removal.

### **Grass Seed in the EYE**

Your pet dog can easily have a grass seed 'fall' or 'flick' into their eye as they sniff their way around the yard at home, or when out on a walk.

The seed may simply stick to the moist surface of the eye or may end up tucked in the pocket behind your dog's eyelid. Dogs have a 'third' eyelid (located at the inner corner of their eye), so a grass seed can be stuck in behind this too.

Often the first sign of a problem is that your dog is suddenly squinting, or rubbing at its eye with its paw. This rubbing can cause further damage to the eyelids or the eye itself, so it is vital that the offending material is removed quickly.



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Move your dog into an area with good lighting, and gently use your fingers to open the eyelids. If you can see the offending seed, you might be able to dislodge it, either by using the dog's eyelids to roll it to the edge of the eye or with larger seeds, by pulling it out gently with your fingers, taking care to make sure that nothing is left behind. If your dog will not let you look, you cannot find anything in the eye, or your dog continues to squint or paw at its face, you will need to contact your vet for advice.

The structures of the eye are very delicate. They can easily become damaged, so eye problems are generally treated as an emergency.

Even if you have managed to remove a seed, there is the risk that the seed could have scratched the surface of the eye, introduced bacteria to the eye, or that some of the seed awns remain where you can't see them. In this case, a vet visit is still advisable to make sure the risk of corneal ulcers, conjunctivitis or permanent damage is minimised.

## **Grass Seed in the EAR**

Just as a seed can fall or flick into your dog's eye as they sniff and explore, the seeds can also enter your dog's ear canal.

The first signs of foreign matter in the ear is a dog that shakes their head – often quite vigorously. Sometimes this strategy works, and the foreign matter is dislodged, but more often than not, the seed wiggles its way further down the ear canal.

Dogs with something in their ear will often hold their head to one side (with the affected ear facing down), paw at the ear opening, and flick their head repeatedly, flapping their ears.

You may get lucky and be able to see the seed when you look in your dog's ear, but it is often quite difficult to get them out. In most cases, your vet will have to remove the seed (or seeds) with a special instrument that fits down the ear canal inside an otoscope, and it may be that your dog needs to be sedated to prevent it moving during the procedure.

If the grass seed is not removed, it may rub against the eardrum, or even pierce through it, which is very painful. There is also the potential for an ear infection to develop.

Dogs that flap their heads are also at risk of damaging the tiny blood vessels in the ear flap itself. This can lead to bleeding under the skin and the development of an *Aural Haematoma* (this is like a huge blood blister that involves the part or all of the soft ear flap, and usually requires surgery to be drained).

## **Grass Seeds in Other Places**

Grass seeds can be inhaled, ingested (eaten or swallowed) or pierce through the body in places other than your dog's feet.

Grass seeds in the throat may cause a cough, but once deeper in the lungs, there may be no symptoms at all until infection or inflammation become quite severe. Grass seeds in the chest have been known to cause pneumonia and even collapsed lungs. If they enter your dog's nostril, you may see a nasal discharge develop, often accompanied by repeated sneezing.

Grass seeds can get trapped in your dog's gums and mouth, but luckily, most of the seeds that get swallowed are digested in the stomach.

Occasionally, seeds have been known to pierce through the wall of the digestive tract and travel into the surrounding tissues and organs. The symptoms of this vary with the location and the organ affected.





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Probably the saddest cases are when a pet's coat is allowed to matt due to neglect. Grass seeds get trapped in the knotted coat and burrow their way into the skin. These dogs not only have to suffer the discomfort and irritation of a knotted and matted coat, but also the pain and irritation of often dozens of grass seeds piercing their skin every time they move.

## Things you can do to Prevent Grass Seeds Affecting Your Pet

There are a number of things you should be doing to prevent your pet from being affected by grass seeds:

- » Keep your backyard tidy – mow the grass regularly and remove grasses and weeds that produce burrs or seeds.
- » Avoid letting your dog run through any long grass (especially during late spring/early summer months). Remember snakes are also a risk at this time of year and may be lurking in the long grass as well!
- » Be vigilant – check your pet regularly during seed season, you should be checking your pet all over, but pay particular attention to their feet and any places where a seed might get trapped.
- » On your daily walks, try to keep to well-maintained areas with short grass.
- » Check your pet's feet when they return from their daily exercise.
- » Keep your pet's coat in good condition. A knot-free coat is less likely to trap seeds and burrs. If your dog has hairy feet, trimming the hair between their toes during grass seed season may also help.

If your pet seems to be behaving differently - licking or chewing at a particular area, rubbing itself, or shaking its head – examine the area that appears to be causing the problem.

A close examination will usually reveal the source of the irritation, but if not, and the behaviour continues, consult your vet for advice.

Remember any irritation to your dog's eyes needs to be seen urgently by your vet to prevent the risk of permanent damage.

