

I recently returned from a weeklong trip to New England. Boston, Harvard Square, Cape Cod, the Red Sox, we saw it all. While I noticed many natural and cultural differences between the east coast and our lovely Bay Area, one difference was something only a veterinarian would notice, let alone write a column about. They have no foxtails in New England.

Foxtails are the small seedpods produced by our indigenous wild grasses. None of us would argue that one of the prettiest sights in our area is the lush green grasses gracing our open spaces during the winter and early spring months. But as our weather changes to longer, dryer days these grasses turn golden brown and their seedpods (alias “foxtails”) are released.

This natural process occurs each year around the second or third week of May. Veterinarians know this because that’s when we start seeing case after case of foxtail related problems in dogs and cats. The onslaught of foxtail-affected patients can last all summer and into the fall, but it’s most intense in May and June.

It turns out these foxtails can easily gain access to the ears, eyes, and nose of our pets and can even penetrate their skin. In severe and thankfully rare cases, foxtails can even migrate from their original penetration site and end up deep in body tissues such as the chest and abdominal cavities; causing severe, sometimes overwhelming problems. Foxtails, because they are foreign to the body, incite a tremendous inflammatory reaction and act as an efficient vehicle to seed serious bacterial infections as well.

Finding and removing the foxtail is the only solution to this frustrating problem. Usually your pet’s doctor can probe the small draining tract in search of the offending plant material, or with the help of a local anesthetic or sedation can gently remove the foxtail from the ear canal or tissues around the eye. Unfortunately, on occasion it can require full general anesthesia and surgery to find and remove the offending grass awn.

As mentioned before, the eyes, ears, nose, and skin are all areas where foxtails are unwelcome intruders. Let’s talk a little about each area and how you might recognize a foxtail problem in your pet.

If your pet is unlucky enough to get a foxtail in the tissues around the eye you will likely see a painful, swollen, squinting eye that may have a thick yellow discharge. Have these symptoms checked out immediately by your veterinarian; a foxtail in the eye can be an intensely painful experience. Cats seem to get foxtails in their eyes quite frequently.

Head shaking, and/or pawing at the ears may suggest a foxtail has managed to get in your pet’s ear canal. Dog and cat ear canals are quite long, and we usually find the foxtail deep in the canal resting on or near the eardrum. With the foxtail so deep in the ear canal it is unlikely you would be able to see the foxtail in the ear without an otoscope. If not removed in a timely manner the foxtail can cause serious problems by migrating into the deeper ear structures.

If your pet happens to sniff a foxtail up into the nose while exploring those dry weeds in the back yard you’re assured to see a lot of sneezing. Often these are violent clusters of sneezing, sometimes resulting in a bloody nose. Dogs are particularly prone to getting foxtails in the nose. This is not a surprise given a dog’s keen sense of smell and their seemingly constant use of their nose to interrogate their surroundings.

Foxtails can penetrate the delicate skin of the toe webbing in dogs. This usually results in a painful swelling in or around the toes. The first symptom a dog owner may notice is excessive licking of the foot or toes. Some of these dogs are brought to us originally for limping-again testament to the painful nature of foxtail problems.

Preventing foxtail problems in your pet is not rocket science. For starters, don't walk or run your dog in areas that have dry grasses. This may also apply to your back yard if it's a little overgrown. I realize your dog loves these open spaces, with all their scents and canine attractions, but is it worth the possibility of a painful problem or even surgery? Not to mention some serious expense for you?

We also recommend keeping the hair on your dogs paws clipped short if it's not naturally that way. Carefully inspect your dog for foxtails after walks. Some families will even schedule their dog for an annual trip to the groomer for a "whole body clip" in an effort to prevent foxtail related problems.

The common foxtail is undoubtedly a serious problem for our animal family members. The way I see it, you can either take a few simple preventative measures to avoid the uncomfortable and expensive problems these little seedpods can cause or, you can move to New England.

Dr. John Huebner practices companion animal medicine at Redwood Veterinary Hospital in Vallejo, CA. You can send your pet health questions to Dr. Huebner at 731 Admiral Callaghan Lane, Vallejo Ca. 94591, or e-mail him at jvhuebner@sbcglobal.net.