The dangers of grass seeds for dogs and cats

I recently removed a grass seed from the ear drum of a cocker spaniel. It had perforated the ear drum and the poor dog was tilting his head to one side and no doubt in considerable pain!

This time of year, the likelihood of grass seeds finding their way onto (and into) your dog is higher than ever.

Grass seeds are sneaky, and they are really good at migrating to strange places. They usually start out sticking to a dog's fur after running through long grass. Their shape makes them perfect for burrowing under the skin, causing significant inflammation – swelling, redness – and infection. We most commonly see them as round, red, abscess like lumps on dogs feet. Left untreated, it is even possible for them to migrate into the body, to internal organs, and even the spine, causing potentially life threatening disease.

The shape of the grass seed is perfect for burrowing into the skin

What are the symptoms of a migrating grass seed?

Symptoms of a grass seed abscess / migrating grass seed depend on the location. For example:

- Foot / skin: pain, swelling, licking area, lameness;
- Ears: itchy, irritated ears; head tilt, shaking head;
- Nose: sneezing, green/white/bloody discharge, pawing at the muzzle;
- Eyes: swollen eyelids, discharge from eye(s);
- Inhaled into windpipe: coughing, fever, fast breathing, not eating;
- Spinal cord: trouble walking, lethargy, fever.

How are migrating grass seeds treated?

Most grass seed abscesses need surgical intervention to find the grass seed, remove it, and debride the abscess itself. Sometimes we will not find the grass seed because it has either disintegrated or

been pushed out, leaving only the inflammation/infection behind. The abscess still needs to be flushed and the dog will usually be put on oral antibitoics to help clear the infection

In complex cases, such as where the grass seed has migrated to the internal organs or the lungs or spine, MRI is used to identify the grass seed so surgery can be targeted to this area.

How can I prevent my pet from getting grass seeds?

The best thing you can do to prevent grass seeds embedding in your dog's skin is to groom (brush) your dog weekly. In one study, clipping the fur and searching for grass seeds was found to be ineffective. However, weekly grooming made a big difference as it reduces the density of the undercoat, reducing the change of grass-seeds sticking.

Mow your lawns after rain, before grass seeds form. If you can, try not to allow your dog to walk through seeded grasses at this time of year. And if you do, check their paws for seeds and groom them thoroughly afterwards.

A typical grass seed abscess in the foot

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