

Anal gland problems in pets can be a recurrent, frustrating and stinky issue. Dr. Karen Becker explains why so many pets have trouble with their anal glands and why the common treatment may be causing more harm than good.

Dr. Becker's Comments:

Anal glands are little sacs that sit right inside of dogs' and cats' rectums. They sit about 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock just inside of the anus, and they're designed to secrete really stinky material that contains pheromones.

Pheromones are chemical messengers that help identify "who's who" in the pack. That's why dogs sniff each other's butts, as the scent provides a lot of biochemical information that dogs need to communicate with one another -- kitties, too.

For thousands of years, dogs and cats have existed with their anal glands with no problems. Adam in the Garden of Eden didn't squeeze his dog's butt. Cavemen in caves didn't put their cats up on rocks and express their anal glands.

Dogs and cats have existed in harmony with their anal glands for quite some time. So the question is, to those of you who have anal gland issues with your pets, 'What's going on?'

Why Do Dogs and Cats Have Recurrent Anal Gland Problems?

In grooming schools during the '40s and '50s (and even some "old school" programs today), groomers were taught to clean the dogs' ears, trim the dogs' and cats' nails, brush their teeth and express the anal glands.

Emptying the anal sacs was considered to be a courtesy, but the downside is that pets were never meant to have those anal glands recurrently expressed.

And one of the main reasons pets have recurrent problems with their anal glands is unnecessary trauma. If every single day I told you to wake up and squeeze your sub-mandibular lymph nodes or glands to express them, you could end up having glandular trauma. Or, if I told you to squeeze your salivary glands every single time you eat, you could end up with soft tissue trauma.

The two tiny glands inside your pets' rectum have a tiny duct that leads out to the anus. When animals poop, feces come into the rectum and as the colon expands, these glands squeeze a little of this stinky material on the feces, which provides biochemical markers for other animals.

This is why your dog insists on stopping to smell poop when you're out on a walk. They're picking up on the anal gland material, which contains a lot of information on the dog that was there last.

All of these systems are meant to work in harmony, however, if that little duct that drains the anal gland becomes swollen shut, all heck can break loose. The area can become very irritated and inflamed, and if those glands swell up and pinch off the outflow tract, there will be no porthole for the material to be secreted.

So, what happens is that when groomers get in there in an attempt to provide a service to you, it can actually create unnecessary trauma. Veterinarians who express your dog's anal glands can cause unnecessary trauma as well.

Unnecessary Trauma Through Recurrent Expression of the Anal Glands

Unnecessary trauma is a major reason why animals have recurrent anal gland problems, so if your pets don't have anal gland problems right now, tell your vets and groomers to please leave them alone.

Do not automatically express your pet's anal glands.

However, if there's an underlying inflammatory condition or low-grade infection that's already in the anal gland, sometimes gentle manipulation by a veterinarian who's capable of recognizing how much pressure to apply can be helpful.

It's very important that your vet knows when to stop squeezing, as the goal is to help the anal gland retrain its muscle tone so that the body can do its job on its own.

One of the biggest issues I see at Natural Pet, my practice, is that groomers have recurrently expressed anal glands once a month or so, whether the pet needs the service or not. When this is done, the muscle around the anal gland that naturally has good tone ends up losing muscle tone.

It's kind of like a balloon. When you buy a balloon it's small and tight but when you blow it up and let the air out, the balloon never goes back to its original taut, small size.

When your pet's body becomes dependent on groomers and veterinarians expressing those anal glands, oftentimes muscle tone is lost and the body ends up not being able to do its job on its own.

So, if muscle tone is lost through recurrent expression, please do not have your veterinarian or groomer automatically express the glands. Instead, your vet can check the glands on a regular basis and determine whether the glands are normal-sized, not

too full, and whether the duct is working properly. In that case, the best choice is to leave them alone.

Inflammation of the GI Tract and Other Organs

The second major reason why we often see recurrent anal gland issues is inflammation of the GI tract. Keep in mind that the rectum in the anus or the very last part of the gastrointestinal tract and any underlying disease or disease cascade that can influence the gastrointestinal tract can also influence the anal glands.

So, for instance, inflammatory bowel disease. If you've got inflammation of the colon, the anal glands can be infected. If your pet has allergies, allergic gastritis or allergic colitis, that can also cause inflammation of the anal glands.

And most importantly, anything that can cause soft stools, such as parasites, medications, and antibiotics, are also major risk factors for causing anal gland issues

This is because part of healthy anal glands is based on firm stool. When feces pass out of the rectum, it's the pressure of the *firm* stool against the colon wall that effectively expresses the anal glands. If your pet's stools are recurrently soft or if they're having diarrhea often, that's really a major metabolic reason why recurrent anal gland issues can become a problem.

The underlying cause that must be addressed in that case is whatever is causing the soft stool.

Allergies can Also Irritate Your Pet's Anal Glands

If your pet is sensitive to ragweeds, grasses, pollens, molds or other allergens in their environment, this can be a problem for their anal glands. All it takes is your pet sitting down outside for those allergens to transfer to the anus and cause overwhelming itching.

So your dog may start to scoot, itch, become red and irritated, and even chew at its rectum, which can create the anal gland problem. So if you've got an [allergenic pet](#), addressing the root cause of the allergies is a great way to secondarily address the anal gland problem.

Anal Glands can Also be in the Wrong Spot

Some animals have anal glands that are placed deep and low inside of the rectum. In this case, even though there is healthy stool being passed out of the rectum, there's not enough pressure to the wayward anal glands to effectively empty their contents during a bowel movement. Very rarely in those situations, those animals have to have anal gland

expression performed because they're not capable of doing it on their own.

In extreme circumstances, sometimes the anal glands have to be surgically removed but you need to know, in my opinion, this is the very last choice. Surgical removal of anal glands falls under the surgical definition of a "salvage procedure", which means it can carry with it a whole host of complications.

So, first and foremost, if you're having problems, identify what the root issue is. And if your pets do have an ergonomic problem (anal glands are set abnormally deep), then you can rely on expression, through a trained professional as minimally as possible, to help provide some relief to your pet.

If Your Pet's Anal Glands are Healthy, Don't Express!

I want you to remember that if your pets don't have an underlying anal gland problem, leave them alone! Do not squeeze the anal glands. If your pets do have anal gland problems, identify if it's an inflammatory response, an allergic response, or a soft stool issue. Addressing the underlying root cause of why your pets are dealing with the recurrent anal gland problem is the best choice to deal with this problem.