



Anal gland problems

What are anal glands?

The anal sacs are scent marking glands located close to the dog's anus at approximately the two o'clock and four o'clock positions. They are passive secretory glands and release small amounts of a noxious smelling substance as a dog defecates. Sometimes the anal sac secretion may be expressed when not defecating and owners may notice an unpleasant smell around their dog's bottom or the house.

What can go wrong?

As they are passive glands (sacs), the small duct can become blocked and the sac over-full or if stools are soft, they may fail to compress the gland enough to squeeze it empty during defecation. This leads to anal irritation and discomfort. Dogs may scoot their bottoms along the floor, or lick excessively. Anal sacs can become over filled or blocked leading to impaction. Often this is a problem associated with allergies or digestive issues and your vet may discuss this with you further. Over-full anal glands are generally resolved via conscious anal sac expression during a consultation with a vet or a vet nurse. If a gland is very sore or difficult to express, your vet may recommend expression of the glands under sedation or general anaesthetic. Supplements may be recommended to reduce the frequency of anal gland issues.

Anal sacs can also become infected, especially if they are prone to become blocked. This is very painful and often results in a swelling, redness, discomfort and sometimes abscess formation. If an abscess forms, it may burst out of the skin on either side of the anus (fistula formation). Anal sac infection is usually treated with oral antibiotics, but the glands may also require flushing and packing with antibiotics under sedation or general anaesthesia. In most circumstances, your vet will recommend a swab for culture and sensitivity to determine which bacteria are present and the best antibiotic to treat the infection.

When is surgery indicated?

Surgery is indicated in cases of recurring obstruction, persistent pain, or recurrent infection. Sometimes a tumour will grow in the anal sacs and this necessitates removal of the affected gland too. The anal sacs are removed with 2 small incisions next to the dog's anus.

The success rate of anal sacculotomy is high but complications are possible with any surgical procedure. Complications are rare (2-5%) and they include infection, fistula formation and faecal incontinence.

Postoperatively, you should make an appointment to see your vet at 2-4 days and 7-10 days postoperatively. The wounds generally heal very quickly and there is minimal requirement to stop exercising. What you will need however, is a robust method of lick prevention to stop any self-trauma delaying healing and introducing infection. Without complication, by 14 days your pet should be back to their normal routine.