CHRONIC OTITIS (RECURRENT EAR INFECTIONS)

What is it? Chronic otitis is chronic, recurring inflammation and infection of the ear canal.

What animals are affected? Chronic otitis can affect any animal. We tend to see the most severe cases in dogs with dependent ears and/or allergy and dermatology issues (Cocker Spaniels and other spaniel breeds, and Labrador Retrievers are quite common).

What are the signs? Dogs with chronic otitis have recurrent ear infections; the ear canal is often very red and swollen and in some cases becomes very thickened and proliferative (a "cauliflower" ear). They often have a distinct “yeast-like” or foul odor from the ear. The cartilage of the canal often becomes very firm and more like bone, which can make the ear look like it is sticking out a bit from the head more at a right angle versus hanging normally. These pets are often head shy and may be irritable because their ears hurt. The owners may have noted a decline in the pet’s hearing as well. If the middle ear is also affected, the pet may develop a head tilt as well (the head is tipped to one side and they cannot hold it straight).

How is it diagnosed? Chronic otitis is diagnosed based on history, appearance and feel of the ear canal, otic examination, and skull radiographs (x-rays) to better visualize the ear canal and the bony bulb at the base of the skull-just on the other side of the eardrum (tympanic bulla).

How is it treated? Usually, chronic otitis is no longer responsive to typical medical therapies and so, surgical options are discussed. Which surgery will be most beneficial depends upon which part of the ear canal is affected and the severity of the otitis. Most cases that involve the horizontal canal, and especially those where the cartilage is becoming bony or mineralized, will require a procedure called a total ear canal ablation and lateral bulla osteotomy (TECA-LBO).

This procedure involves surgically removing the entire ear canal, cleaning out the bulla and then closing the site. This removes the source of infection and pain and allows the dog to have a comfortable, good quality of life.

What after care is needed? After a TECA-LBO the patient needs to have restricted activity for a couple of weeks while the incisions are healing. They often need to wear an Elizabethan collar so they do not rub or scratch the ears while they are healing. After suture removal, no further treatment should be needed with the exception of follow-up with any dermatology issues that may be concurrent.

What is the prognosis? Prognosis with TECA-LBO is very good. Some complications can occur, including a residual head tilt if one was present initially, damage to the facial nerve resulting in an inability to blink that eye, and droopiness to that side of the face, or recurrence of a draining tract if some of the infected tissue is left behind at the time of surgery. Most of these complications can be managed well and do not significantly affect the pet’s quality of life. Another very likely "complication” is further hearing loss because the ear canal is no longer present to allow the sound waves to be transmitted. Most dogs do retain some degree of hearing from the conduction of vibrations, and most are so much more comfortable that even with less hearing their quality of life is significantly improved.