

Protecting Your Pet from Grass Seeds and Awns

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

There are many different kinds of grasses, as well as other plants, that have seeds or awns (bristle-like fibers) that are a particular shape that allows them to stick to various surfaces. Burdock is a good example. There are, however, smaller seeds, such as those of foxtail, speargrasses, buzzard grasses, and feathergrasses that not only stick, but can actually invade into the tissue of an animal's body.

How do grass seeds cause problems?

These seeds may either enter the nose, get between the eye and eyelids, be found between the toes, or make their way into the gums, ears, toes, or other parts of an animal's body. Those seeds causing the most problems are those shaped like small darts. They have a very sharp point and a long tail. When they come in contact with an animal's skin or other body part, they prick it. A small swelling may result. If the awn or seed is not removed immediately, it may actually start to burrow in. Some can travel many inches reaching the animal's internal organs.



What are the signs a grass seed may be present?

Pets may react differently depending upon the number, location, and shape of the seed.

Hair: If large seeds are in the hair behind the ears of a dog, there may be no sign of a problem other than matted hair.

Ear: A seed in the ear canal may cause the pet to shake his head, scratch at the ear, rub his ear on the floor, or hold his head at a slightly tilted angle.

Eye: A seed between the eye and the eyelid may cause the eye to become red and inflamed, sometimes with discharge or tears. An ulcer of the cornea could result and possibly lead to vision loss.

Nose: A seed in the nose may cause the animal to sneeze, paw at the nose, and may result in some nasal discharge.

Skin: A pet may chew at an area where seeds have become attached on the skin, and one or more of the following may occur:

1. The pet is able to remove the seeds.
2. The seeds become attached to the gums, tongue, and mouth.
3. The seeds are swallowed. If swallowed, they may stick to the back of the throat near the tonsils and cause inflammation and swelling. Pets with seeds in this area may cough, retch, or gag, and have difficulty eating and swallowing.
4. The seeds burrow deeper into the skin. If this occurs, swelling, abscesses, and open draining sores may result.

Lungs and other organs: Seeds and awns can be accidentally inhaled or migrate from the skin into the chest and enter the lung where they can cause very serious life-threatening abscesses. They can also penetrate into the abdominal organs. Seeds may also migrate to areas near the spine, where they can cause considerable damage. When internal organs or the spine are affected, a pet may become very ill, not eat, and develop a fever. The pet may also have obvious problems such as vomiting or difficulty breathing.

What can I do to protect my pet?

Pets who spend more time outside, especially field dogs and working breeds, are at most risk of having problems due to awns and seeds. If possible, prevent your pet from running through areas of tall grass, or grass that is obviously seeding. Protective vests that cover the chest and abdomen are commercially available. Clipping long-haired pets who go outside in the fall may also be helpful.

When returning from a walk or field work, groom your dog immediately and remove any seeds. Check closely between the toes, in the ears, and in the "armpits" and groin areas, since these are common places to find seeds and awns. If you find a seed, try removing it with a pair of tweezers. If you cannot remove the seed, contact your veterinarian as soon as possible, since it will only become more deeply buried and harder to take out.

Once seeds and awns become buried, either in the skin, mouth, or other places, it is often very difficult to find them, and often requires surgery. The entry point may or may not be visible, and it is often difficult to find the tiny seed itself, especially if it has migrated several inches. Having to make several different incisions in an attempt to find the seed is often necessary, and there may be more than one seed. Some animals have had to be placed on antibiotics or antifungal



medications for very long periods of time due to infections caused by plant seeds and awns.

Prevent your pet from chewing on grasses that have seed heads. If you think your pet may have eaten grass and is having problems such as coughing or gagging, again, contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

The bottom line: Protect your pet from encounters with grass seeds and awns. If you suspect your pet is having a problem due to seeds, contact your veterinarian as soon as possible, before a very serious condition develops.