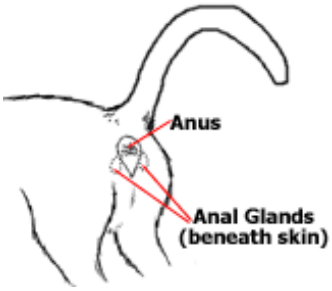
Anal Glands (Anal Sacs): Impaction & Abscesses in Cats

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Anal gland disease is a common problem in cats and dogs. The anal glands, also called 'anal sacs,' can become impacted, infected, and abscessed. Affected pets may lick the anal area, 'scoot' along the floor, or have problems with defecation.

Location and function of anal glands



As the cat is viewed from behind, anal glands (also called anal sacs) are located on each side of and slightly below the anal opening, at the 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock positions. A tiny duct or tube leads under the skin to an opening directly beside the anus.

All predators, whether they are felines or canines in the wild, or skunks in your backyard, have anal glands. They just use them differently. Skunks discharge the secretion from these glands as a form of defense, while dogs use it primarily for territorial marking or as a form of communication. In cats and dogs, every time a stool is passed, it should put enough pressure on the anal glands that some of the secretion is deposited on the surface of the stool. Other cats and dogs are then able to tell who has been in the neighborhood, just by sniffing the stools they find. Additionally, cats and dogs recognize each other by smelling each other in the general area of the anus, since each animal's anal glands produce a unique scent.

Diseases of the anal glands

Anal gland impactions, infections, and abscesses can occur. Here is how: For various reasons, such as the conformation of the animals, the thickness of the gland's secretions, or the softness of the stool, these glands and their ducts often become clogged, or 'impacted.' When this occurs, the animal will sit down on its rear quarters and drag its anal area across the floor or ground. This is often called 'scooting.' Both cats and dogs may also lick the anal area excessively.

Anal glands may also become infected and abscess. Bacteria make their way into the glands, probably through the ducts. This is a very painful condition, and the first sign you may see is that the animal attempts to bite or scratch when you touch the area near the tail.

Treatment and prevention

When the glands become impacted, a veterinarian, groomer, or the pet's owner must clean them out, or 'express' them. This empties the glands of all material. It is done by applying pressure with the finger, start below the gland and then pushing upwards. In some dogs, this needs to be done every week or two. Cats generally need this procedure less often.

Impacted glands do not affect the overall health of the pet. The problem is that pets may injure the anal area when scooting across the ground, or discharge the secretion on the carpet or floor. And this material has a terrible odor.

Anal gland abscesses must be lanced by a veterinarian, and antibiotics are usually given to the pet for seven to 14 days. Using warm compresses on the area often helps to relieve some of the pain and reduce swelling. Secondary problems sometimes occur with abscesses, as they may cause scar tissue or other damage that may affect the nerves and muscles in this area. This can cause fecal incontinence, meaning the pet cannot retain its stools.

If an individual pet only has an occasional problem with the gland, they can be dealt with as needed. However, for pets with repeated or chronic problems, surgical removal of the glands is recommended. With the removal of these glands all problems associated with these glands are eliminated for the remainder of the pet's life. Although a fairly simple procedure, complications such as fecal incontinence can rarely occur.

Cats with recurrent anal gland impactions are often placed on a high fiber diet. The high fiber makes the animal's stool more bulky. The stool will put more pressure on the anal glands and hopefully the glands will express themselves when the animal defecates. There are several commercial brands of high fiber cat food available. Animals may also be supplemented with bran or medications such as Metamucil which will increase the bulk of the stool.

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