

I can see a lot of wax in my cat's ears. He is not shaking his head or scratching at his ears. Should I be cleaning them?

It can be normal for cats to have some waxy discharge in their ears. You may not need to clean them if he is not uncomfortable. If a cat is shaking his head or scratching his ears, that could indicate a bacterial infection or ear mites which will require treatment. You should be aware that unnecessary cleaning may cause more problems than it solves. This is one of the ways that cats differ from dogs. In some cats, even a gentle cleaning can result in Horner's syndrome. This is a neurological condition that occurs after damage to the nerves that control the muscles of the eye. The nerve runs from the brain to the chest, up the neck, below the ear, and to the eye. While trauma anywhere along the path of the nerve can cause eye problems, ear cleaning or ear infection are the most likely culprits. Four telltale changes to look for: drooping eyelid, smaller pupil, sunken eye, and part of the eye being hidden by the pink third eyelid in the corner. Luckily this condition usually goes away on its own within a few weeks.

Another ill effect of ear cleaning in cats is vestibular syndrome. Another neurological disorder, this one involves damage to the tiny balance apparatus in the inner ear along with the nerve of the brain that is responsible for maintaining balance in an animal. Your cat may have a head tilt, walk in circles, fall to one side or have unusual rapid movements of the eyes. While most cases of vestibular syndrome in cats are idiopathic (have no known cause), ear infections or ear cleaning products especially if the ear drum is ruptured can result in vestibular disease. Again, like Horner's syndrome, the symptoms generally resolve fairly rapidly with or without medication. If the problem is related to a tumor in the ear, signs will not resolve without surgery.

As you can see from these two possible outcomes, ear cleaning in cats is best left to your veterinarian and her staff, but even with gentle cleaning and ear-safe products, unfortunately we too may have rare unexpected outcomes.

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