

Anal Glands

By Cliff Faver, DVM

Anal glands are actually a scent gland very similar to skunk scent glands. In the wild, they actually function to mark territory as the wild dog has a bowel movement. They also work as a powerful deterrent when predators are chasing them. When scared, the animal will exude the glands in fear, which causes the predator to stop and smell or possibly decide that this animal may not taste so well.

The actual glands are located at about 5 o'clock and 7 o'clock if you were looking at the anal region. These glands are teardrop shaped and lie under the anal sphincter muscle. When a dog or cat has a normal bowel movement and "pinch" off the stool, the pressure between the stool and the anal muscle exudes out the material. The pet can also express them by scooting or licking.

When there is no inflammation, allergies, infection, and/or there is normal stool, there is no reason ever to express anal glands. They should function fine on their own.

There are many different problems that do warrant expressing anal glands, though. Here are a few:

Over-secretion:

This is commonly due to allergies or hypothyroid problems (not enough thyroid production). These dogs are often scooting or licking.

Chronic allergies/irritation:

Anal glands are actually considered an extension of the skin. The inflammatory process associated with allergies often swells the opening, making it difficult for the pet to express its own glands.

Infection:

If the glands get stagnant because the animal can't express them, infection can happen very easily. The openings are located at the bottom of the anal area, so constant exposure to fecal material also sets the gland up for infection and severe irritation.

Loose stool/diarrhea:

If the stool is not of normal consistency, then it does not allow the gland to be expressed normally.

All of the above mentioned problems can be minor, or they can lead to more severe problems. Expressing the gland is the first line of defense in solving these problems. The correct way of

expressing the gland involves inserting a gloved finger (with adequate lubrication so you don't irritate the area) inside the rectum and gently "milking" the gland. This is the preferred method, because you are actually able to feel the gland adequately. This is an area of controversy, because some state laws require a medical license (certified veterinary technician or veterinarian) to legally insert a finger rectally.

Another method is to squeeze the glands externally to exude the material. This method is much more risky, because you can easily rupture the glands and cause excessive irritation (and swelling later). Often owners don't recognize a problem until it has progressed to the level of an abscess. Many are unaware until they find a "hole" below the rectum or discover smelly fluid draining from the rectal area. Once progressed to the abscess stage, this is a medical issue. Treatment of the problem requires antibiotics, flushing with anti-bacterial agents, and/or surgery. Additionally, once a gland has ruptured it increases its chances of happening again.

Once the gland has ruptured or the problem is deemed chronic, then surgical removal of the glands should be considered. Many owners are never given the option of surgery, or they think it would be cheaper not to have surgery. The reality is that many owners pay more (sometimes two to three times as much) by not taking out the glands, not to mention causing the pet severe pain in a very sensitive area over a long period of time.