

ANAL GLANDS: "A PAIN IN THE BUTT"

Anal glands are scent glands located at 5 o'clock and 7 o'clock around the anus. They are tear drop shaped glands that lie under the anal sphincter muscle with very small openings to the edge of the anal area. In a normal situation, they are emptied when the animal squeezes the muscle against the bowel movement or tenses with a stressful situation.

In the wild, animals use these glands as a way of marking their territory or as a distraction when being pursued by a predator. In social settings, you may have noticed that animals tend to sniff the rear-end of other animals, this is because they are trying to pick up a familiar scent.

In our domestic animals these functions are less significant, however, the health of the glands is still important. In most situation the animals can maintain the glands themselves. Occasionally they will "scoot" if the glands become enlarged, which is usually adequate for relief. If the scooting is frequent (more than once or twice in a close time frame) or there is excessive licking of the area, the glands could be impacted or infected and need further attention.

Impactions occur from over- production of the gland, loose stools, infection, or any irritation of the area that causes swelling. The anal gland secretion is normally an odiferous liquid, but can change to a thick pasty type debris that is very hard to excrete.

If a problem occurs, it is best to consult a veterinarian to evaluate the issue and to give the animal relief. Depending on the situation, the veterinarian will come up with an appropriate follow-up plan which may include antibiotics, infusing the gland, and/or follow up checks. Left unattended, these glands can easily abscess and create a larger issue.

Many feel that routine expression of the anal glands is helpful to prevent issues. If done incorrectly, frequent expressions can cause a rupture or irritate the openings which prevents the normal healthy out flow. The technique plays a significant role in this. The correct way to express an anal gland is to insert an index finger into the rectum and use the thumb to "milk" the gland. This method gives a better feel for the size of the gland and the amount of pressure required to empty the gland. This method in most states is reserved for the veterinary field. Another method commonly used by non-medical personnel is the external method where the glands are squeezed on either side of the rectum. If the gland is healthy and easily expressed, this can be done with minimum incident. The issue with this method is the gland cannot be clearly defined and there is no way to adequately trap the gland. This requires more pressure and often leads to much more irritation of the area than the internal method and potential damage/rupture on an unhealthy gland.

Worst case scenario, when the glands become impacted or abscessed, they often will rupture, leaving a hole on either side (ventral) of the anus. If this occurs it is important to seek veterinary care. These can be treated surgically or as an open wound depending on the situation. Once these glands rupture, the chance of reoccurrence goes up immensely. The glands can be removed, but it is not recommended at the time of the rupture. A good time to consider removing them is a couple of months after the rupture

has healed. One complication to be aware of in removal is scar tissue or nerve damage that can lead to incontinence.

This is a very hot topic when it comes to the grooming industry. Most groomers do not particularly enjoy expressing anal glands, but feel they are forced to do them by veterinarians. Let's go back and look at the history that led to this. Veterinarians used to encourage their clients to come in for routine anal gland expressions. As veterinarians got busier, they taught their staff and groomers (external) how to take care of the routine and they only dealt with the diseased glands. The difference between the veterinarian and groomer is that groomers did not charge for the service. That made it an easy choice to make when price was a concern. Unfortunately, when things go wrong (for that free service) guess who is responsible to pay for the "fix"?

There are a few important things to consider before moving forward with anal gland expression. First, what are the laws in your state. Is it ok to express anal glands? Can you do them internally or is only external legal? Can you charge for the service or is that considered practicing medicine? Just because the local veterinarian sends the clients to you for gland expression and recommends you follow through, does not mean it is legal in your state. Make sure you are aware of the laws! Second, if you offer this as a free service and you rupture a gland, it could potentially cost you in a court battle with the pet owner. Often, the groomer is not truly at fault, but they are still held liable. If you decide to compensate the owner for the bill, that free service could cost you around \$500-1000. So, let's think about that from a business aspect. If your profit (not wages) is \$20 per groom, then that means you will have to groom 25-50 dogs to recoup the cost of treating the dog. Was it worth offering that service?

The general rule of thumb is "if it isn't broke don't fix it". If things are left alone, the animals tend to do very well on their own. However, it is imperative that we observe the animal's behavior. If they have a problem, it is truly "a pain in the butt" therefore, their behavior will let us know if there is an issue.