

SMELLING, SNEEZING AND SNOTTING PETS — SEVEN COMMON CAUSES OF CHRONIC NASAL DISCHARGE IN DOGS AND CATS

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Nasal discharge is a common and readily identifiable sign of abnormality in pets. Normal pets have cold, clean, damp noses while animals with an underlying medical condition will tend to have changes in the appearance of their nose. The accumulation of nasal discharge from one or both nostrils can be one of the changes that can occur with illness. The remainder of this article will explore 7 causes of nasal discharge in dogs and cats.

1. Infection. Infections that cause nasal discharge can be primary (i.e. the sole cause of the problem) or secondary (i.e. a result of some other issue, such as the other causes listed in this article). Primary infections can be caused by a virus, fungus, or bacteria. Secondary infections are most often bacterial in nature but can include a fungus as well. Age, lifestyle, and species can often be used to rule in or out the possibility of a primary or secondary infection. For example, in young kittens, nasal discharge is very commonly due to a virus whereas nasal discharge in an older cat, without a previous history of nasal discharge, is often due to something else.

2. Foreign Body. The accidental introduction of a foreign object into the nose will eventually cause nasal discharge that is typically one sided, yellow or green, and associated with profuse sneezing. Common items that end up in animal noses include grass, plant seeds, small insects, and small sticks/twigs. The longer an object is present in the nose, the more likely nasal discharge is to occur.

3. Dental disease. Advanced dental disease that results in the loss of the bony structures that support the teeth of the upper jaw can cause nasal discharge. When this occurs, the thin wall of tissue between the tooth root and the nasal cavity becomes damaged and results in a communication (fistula) between the mouth and nose. Infectious debris and even food can then enter the nose through the fistula and result in infection and nasal discharge. In this situation, the pet will often have a history of bad breath, sneezing, thick yellow/green nasal discharge, and possibly tooth loss.

4. Nasopharyngeal polyps. Nasopharyngeal polyps occur in cats and can arise from several structures. They are typically inflammatory in nature and are not cancerous. Affected cats will often sneeze or can have a history of prolonged ear problems. Removal of the entire polyp is the only way to stop the nasal discharge.

5. Inflammatory rhinitis. Little is understood about the underlying causes of this condition/syndrome. It is typically diagnosed when no other cause for nasal discharge can be identified and is more often diagnosed in dogs. Affected animals are typically normal with the exception of a profuse, unilateral or bilateral, green to yellow, nasal discharge.

6. Masses/tumors. In older animals, cancerous tumors are a common cause of nasal discharge. The most common nasal tumors are locally aggressive, meaning they don't typically spread to other parts of the body. They are often highly destructive and can invade into other structures in the same vicinity such as the opposite nostril or the eye.

7. Allergies. While most people assume that a runny nose is an allergy, it is actually a very UNCOMMON cause of nasal discharge in animals. More commonly, animals with allergies have skin problems associated with intense itching. If an animal is experiencing nasal discharge due to an allergy, it is often a thin, watery texture, and clear.

History and physical exam findings can often give a lot of clues as to the cause of the nasal discharge. Information on the age of the animal, vaccination status, duration of the discharge, location of the discharge (unilateral, bilateral, or unilateral that spread to bilateral), color and texture of the discharge, presence or absence of blood, eye involvement, presence or absence of jaw pain, associated weight loss, and dental history are all important pieces of the diagnostic puzzle.

Because there are many different causes of nasal discharge, there are many different steps to forming a proper diagnosis. These include, physical exam, oral exam including probing the teeth, bloodwork, nasal radiographs, culture, biopsy, and nasal flush/cytology. Most of these procedures are best accomplished with the use of a flexible or rigid endoscope. In some instances, a CT or MRI scan may be necessary to diagnose the underlying cause of a chronic nasal discharge. Treatment for chronic nasal discharge is solely dictated by the diagnosis and may or may not include antibiotics, antifungals, antihistamines, nasal decongestants, steroids, surgery, and radiation.

The information here is provided for educational purposes only and is not intended to take the place of your veterinarian. As always, if you have questions regarding the health of your pet, do not hesitate to contact a licensed veterinarian.