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ANAL SAC DISEASE

The anal sacs are little pockets that sit under the skin on either side of the anus (ie. there is one on either side of the anus). These sacs fill with a dog or cats own "scent-fluid." When a dog or cat has a bowel movement, as the feces passes through the anus, it passes the anal sacs and some of the fluid is squeezed out onto the stool - this fluid "marks" this animals territory. Wild dogs and cats urinate and defecate much more frequently than our domestic pets because they travel in search of food; and also, they "stake out their territory" by marking with urine and feces. So, basically, all the anal sacs are used for is identification (that's why dogs have the socially unacceptable habit - to us humans - of sniffing the rear end of a "friend" upon first meeting). Skunks also have these sacs, and can empty them at will!!!

Even though these sacs are SUPPOSE to empty with each bowel movement, sometimes mother nature doesn't cooperate, and the anal sacs overflow, much to the discomfort of the dog or cat. When that happens the pet may chew at its hips, flanks, groins, under its tail or even its rear abdomen. The pet often "scoots" its rear on the ground or carpet when the anal sacs become full. The scooting or chewing causes more pain. If only the self-induced wounds are treated, the problem cannot be resolved. These anal sacs must be manually expressed (emptied). We do not advise owners to do this, and, most groomers will only express the anal sacs from the outside - this is usually routine with most grooming appointments, and is quite appropriate; but, if a pet is having a problem, examination by a veterinarian may be in order. If the anal sacs become very impacted, painful infections can occur, often times resulting in rupture of these sacs. In these cases emergency care is required, and the pet will probably receive antibiotics. Surgery is also sometimes required following an anal sac rupture.

Why some dogs and cats (we see one cat anal sac problem for every 30-40 dog anal sac problems) have more of a problem is just conjecture. We feel that perhaps the lack of exercise that our domestic pets receive (compared to their wild counterparts) contributes to the problem, as does the few bowel movements that our pets have. There is little a pet owner can do to minimize problems with anal sacs, other than having them cleaned out often by a qualified professional. Also, increasing vigorous exercise can be helpful. Adding a small amount of unflavored Metamucil, or other bulk former to the diet may also help the anal sacs empty more naturally, whenever the pet has a bowel movement. With chronic or recurrent sac infections, or if a pet requires anal sac expression more than once every 4-6 weeks, we may suggest that they be surgically removed. Domestic dogs and cats do not NEED their anal sacs, like people don't need the appendix any more. So, surgical removal of the anal sacs is often recommended to eliminate an otherwise bothersome and painful problem.