

MOOSE JAW ANIMAL CLINIC

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Anal Sacs

What on Earth Are Anal Sacs?

Anal sacs (also called anal glands) are two small glands just inside your pet's anus. The material secreted into these glands is thick and foul smelling and unique to each animal. Most wild animals can empty these glands voluntarily for scent marking (marking territory) or in self-defense, like a skunk might.

Domestic animals have largely lost their ability to consciously control the emptying of these sacs. Walking around and normal defecation usually serves to empty the glands unconsciously, but some animals become unable to empty these glands without help. This may develop after an episode of soft stool, diarrhea or a food change, or may be a physical abnormality that is frequently seen in small and toy breed dogs. When this happens, the anal sacs become impacted (too full) and uncomfortable. Dogs with impacted anal sacs usually scoot their rear on the ground (drag their bum on the floor) in an attempt to empty the glands and relieve discomfort. Some dogs will lick their anal area and other dogs will chase their tails. Cats often create a bald patch by licking just under their tails. Impacted anal glands are not the only cause of these symptoms, however, so please have a veterinarian check out this problem.

What Happens if an Impacted Sac Doesn't Get Emptied?

When an anal gland becomes too full, and pressure is placed on it (during defecation), the gland can break open under the skin and form an infection (abscess). This abscess can then rupture out through the skin. This is a very painful, messy, and pretty smelly condition often mistaken for rectal bleeding. If an anal sac abscess forms, it must be properly treated by your veterinarian. Drainage of the abscess may be needed and medications for the infection, pain and swelling will be given to treat the condition. After an abscess has occurred, the anal sacs should be emptied by the veterinarian 6 weeks and 3 months after the abscess to check healing and see if your pet is able to empty his glands on his own.

How Often Should Anal Sacs Be Emptied?

This is a highly individual situation. The best recommendation is to let the pet tell you when the sacs are full. If the pet starts scooting (or licking) again, it is time to bring him in. Most pets only need the glands emptied every 3 to 6 months, but some pets need this done much more frequently.

What if My Pet's Sacs Seem to Require Emptying All the Time?

To avoid the expense of having the sacs emptied, you can learn to empty them yourself at home. Most people feel it is well worth having someone else perform this service. A simple preventative treatment that helps some patients is a change to a high fiber diet. This will produce a bulkier stool that may be more effective in emptying the sac as it passes by. Some people will choose to add canned pumpkin to the regular diet instead of changing the entire menu.

If the sacs need to be emptied every few weeks or more, you may opt to have the sacs permanently removed. This procedure is complicated by many local nerves controlling fecal continence, the fact that any change in the local musculature of the anal sphincter area can affect fecal continence, and the fact that with chronic anal sac problems the anatomy is distorted. Draining tracts can develop after surgery if the gland is not completely removed. Still, despite these pitfalls, anal sac removal is considered a relatively simple surgery by most veterinarians who have experience with the procedure.

Many people own pets for years without ever learning that anal sacs exist at all, and the wives' tale that worms cause scooting continues to be spread. If you have further questions about anal gland disease, ask your veterinarian.

What To Do About Scooting?

The first step is to have a veterinarian check the anal sacs when any pet has a history of scooting or licking under the tail. Once the problem has been determined, the anal sacs can be emptied in one of two ways, externally or internally; see below.

Externally	Internally
A rag or tissue is held up to the anus and both sides of the anal area are squeezed. If the secretion is very pasty, this method may be inadequate to empty the sacs.	A lubricated gloved finger is inserted in the anus and the sac is squeezed between thumb and forefinger into a tissue held externally. The full anal gland feels like a grape, and they are located at the 4 to 5 and 7 to 8 o'clock positions in relation to the anus (tail is at 12 o'clock). The emptying procedure is repeated on the opposite side.

What If Scooting Continues?

If scooting continues for more than a few days after sac emptying, the anal glands should be re-checked. For some individuals, it takes several times in a row before the sacs stay emptied. Some pets have such dry material in the anal sacs that medication must be infused into the glands several times in order to soften the material enough that it can be removed. If the sacs are empty and scooting is persisting, another cause (such as itchy skin, infection, or lower back pain) should be pursued.

If the sacs have been emptied adequately, the scooting should resolve in a couple of days.