

# FOXTAILS

By Mona Miller, DVM



Foxtails can be found throughout Lamorinda Photo Andy Scheck

**F**oxtails present a significant health hazard to animals throughout California, from late spring through fall. It is impossible to miss this wild annual grass if one goes out into any un-landscaped area. The name refers to the bushy spike arrangement at the top of the grass that resembles the tail of a fox – it is a cluster of spikelets attached to a main stem. Each cluster comes off the plant easily, and tiny barbs clasp onto material (socks, fur, etc). Then, the sharp point at the base of the cluster allows it to move forward into the material. This is the plant’s adaptation for dispersing its seeds throughout an area. For most wild animals that live in the same native environments that foxtails are found, their fur is short enough that the foxtail does not migrate into the skin, but is transported and dropped off, allowing for successful seed dispersal. However, for our domestic pets we often find that the foxtail point will migrate into tissue and thereby cause problems.

I have seen foxtails in every part of an animal’s body. Symptoms are related to the body part affected. Some areas are easier than others to find and remove the foxtails – such as in-between toes, the undersides of paws, ear canals and conjunctival lining of the eyes. Even in these areas, though, there may be significant pain associated with the foxtail (and its resultant inflammation and infection) that the dog may need sedation or even anesthesia to remove it. Dogs who lick their paws, shake their heads and ears and have swollen painful eyes should be checked for a foxtail. Foxtails can get into a female dog’s vulva, causing licking and changes in urination habits. Other areas are more hidden –

full anesthesia would be required in the majority of cases to visualize and remove foxtails in the throat and nose. The classic case of a dog inhaling a foxtail into his nose would be one running around in open space, and starting to sneeze violently. The sneezing may subside as the foxtail settles over the next few hours to days, but this is something to check with your veterinarian. Coughing and gagging are common symptoms when a foxtail (or blades of grass) gets stuck in the tonsil area.

Foxtails in cats are much less common, possibly because cats are meticulous cleaners, but I have seen foxtails in cats’ eyes and ear canals.

When a foxtail gets embedded into tissue, it is only a matter of time before it will start to penetrate inside. Foxtails can form abscesses in the fat tissue under the skin, and also inside the lungs and abdomen. Obviously, it is best to address a foxtail problem before it has advanced inside the body and requires subsequent surgical diagnosis and removal.

Additional information can be found at [www.veterinary-partner.com](http://www.veterinary-partner.com) and [www.cvma.net](http://www.cvma.net).



Keep your dog on leash while walking trails

Dr. Mona S. Miller lives in Lafayette with her 3 year old son and her yellow Labrador Retriever. She has worked at Four Seasons Animal Hospital in Lafayette since moving here in 2001. She attended Cal as an undergrad, and received her DVM from U.C. Davis. She can be reached at Four Seasons, 938-7700, or by email to [MonaSDVM@aol.com](mailto:MonaSDVM@aol.com).