

**Dear Dr. Wise:** Our outdoor kittens have a lot of dark and crumbly dirt in their ears. Is this something we should be concerned about?

**Answer:** It sounds like you are experiencing a very common problem with your outdoor kittens. The debris you are describing indicates you may be having a problem with ear mites. Ear mites are small parasites that resemble tiny ticks that frequently infect the ears of dogs and cats. The most common sign that your kittens may be infected is intense itching and violent head shaking. The parasites are very irritating and may actually cause them to traumatize themselves behind the ears due to the intense scratching with their hind paws. You will typically notice a dry, crumbly, dark brown waxy discharge which resembles coffee grounds and may be foul smelling. Ear mite infection is detrimental to the kitten's overall health and well-being and may also be a precipitating factor for secondary bacterial or yeast infections.

You should make a trip to your veterinarian as soon as possible. He or she will do an examination with a magnifying otoscope and take a sample of the debris for microscopic examination to confirm the presence of the mites. Your kittens' ears will be cleaned out at the clinic and you will be sent home with some ear drop medication that you can apply at home. Antibiotics may also be prescribed for treatment of any secondary bacterial infections. Please be sure to follow your veterinarian's instructions for application and administration of any prescribed medication.

Once the infection has cleared, prevention is key especially in outdoor cats. A product called Revolution is a once a month topically applied insecticide and is used for the treatment and prevention of heartworm, fleas, and ear mites. Once a month treatment with this product is highly recommended for all of your pets regardless of indoor/outdoor status. If you have any further questions regarding ear mite infection and/or prevention, contact your veterinarian.