

## Malassezia dermatitis

### What is Malassezia?

*Malassezia* are yeast that are found as normal commensals on the skin of dogs and cats, and have a mutually beneficial relationship with bacteria that also colonise the skin. For the majority of animals, these yeast cause no harm. However, in certain conditions, numbers of *Malassezia* can multiply causing inflammation of the skin (dermatitis). The most common species in companion animals is *Malassezia pachydermatitis*, and is commonly found on skin, in ear canals and around the mouth, vaginal and anal areas.



### Why does Malassezia sometimes cause skin or ear disease?

There are various theories why normally harmless yeast can cause skin disease (dermatitis), including:

- increased humidity e.g. in warm, moist humid areas such as ear canals and skin folds, especially breeds like Spaniels with droopy ears.
- animals with scaly and greasy skin disorders, due to allergic skin disease or hormonal disease (underactive thyroid or Cushing's disease in dogs) are more likely to suffer from *Malassezia* dermatitis, due to increased amounts of nutrients and growth factors.

- certain breed dispositions e.g. Spaniels, Westies, Boxers, Bulldogs and Bassett hounds, Devon Rex cats also seem particularly susceptible.

## **Symptoms**

- scaly, inflamed skin at sites such as lips, ear canals, armpits, neck and between the toes
- greasy skin with a distinctive malodour
- itching and scratching
- head shaking
- recurrent ear infections
- chewing / nibbling
- licking feet
- reddish brown discolouration of the hair (saliva staining) and claws
- darkening and thickening of the skin in chronic conditions that resembles elephant hide (lichenification)
- hair loss.

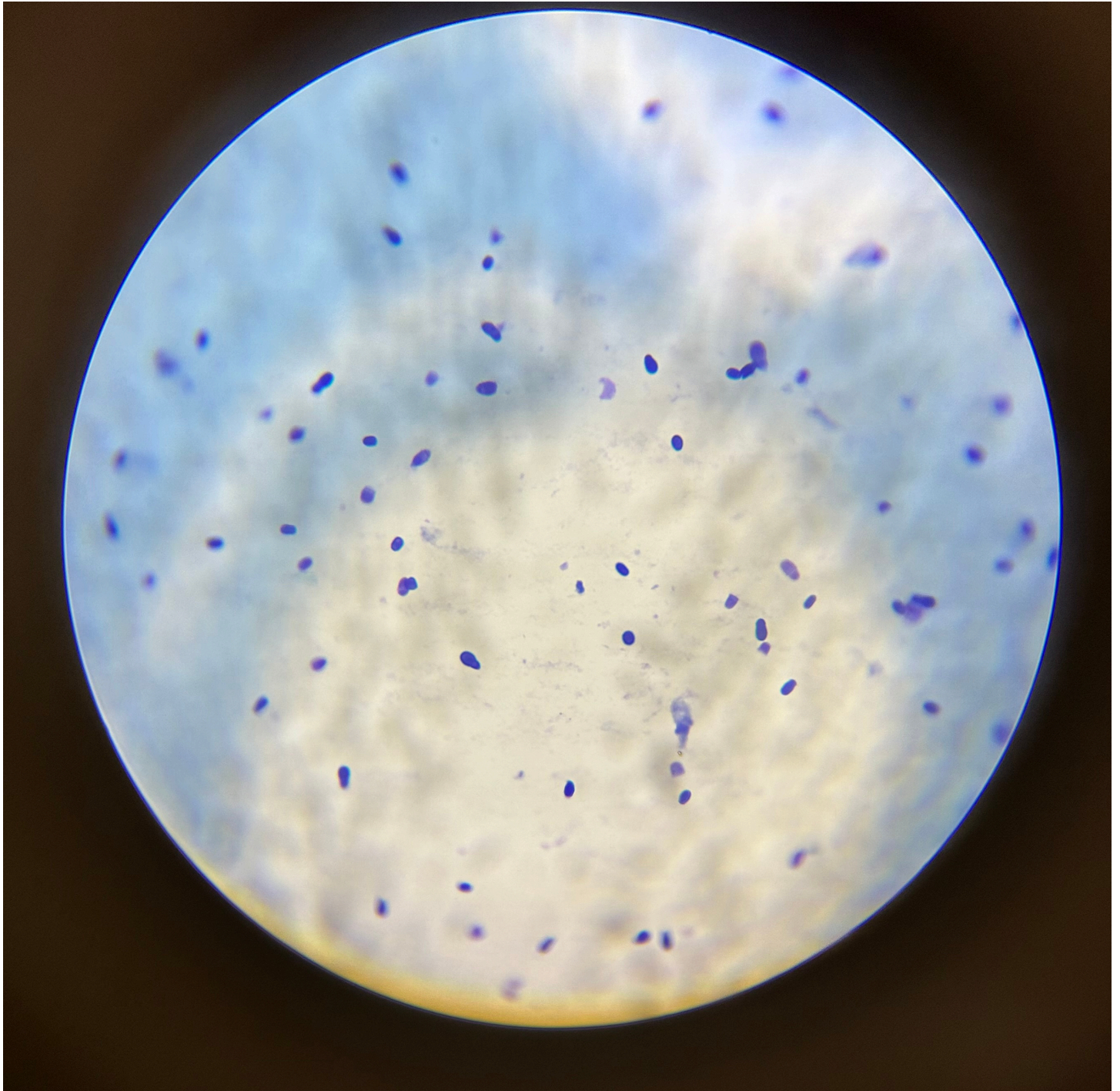


## **Investigations**

The clinical signs caused by *Malassezia* are similar to a long list of other skin diseases, so a diagnosis cannot be made without performing some tests. However, the good news is that the most useful test is relatively cheap and easy.

A swab, tape strip or impression smear is taken from the affected area e.g. ears, skin folds or between the toes. These are then stained with special stains and examined under the microscope to look at material from the skin's surface and to look for microbes. We expect to see the occasional yeast but in *Malassezia* dermatitis, yeast will be present in significantly high numbers and sometimes associated with inflammatory cells.

*Malassezia* are purple when stained and look peanut-shaped, or look footprints in snow.



### **Treatment**

Treatment of *Malassezia* dermatitis aims to lower the numbers of yeast down to normal levels again, treat any secondary infections and calm the itching associated with it. It is also important to address the underlying triggers.

Various topical products are available and are the first line of treatment;

- anti-fungal shampoos containing chlorhexidine. These require regular use and 10 minute contact time before washing them off.
- if regular shampooing is not possible, there are also mousses, rinses and wipes that can be used.
- anti-fungal ear products containing miconazole can be used on affected skin too, not just in the ears.
- steroid sprays or creams are sometimes used to reduce the inflammation and take away the pruritis (itching).

In recurrent cases, oral medication may be required. These products do not come without their risks and should be reserved for cases not responding to other treatments. We would also recommend performing blood tests prior to starting and during treatment to ensure that your pet's liver function is adequate.

Addressing any underlying issues is going to result in greater success of treatment. This includes treating allergies, metabolic diseases with medication, concurrent skin infections, or parasite treatment if indicated.

### **Prognosis**

The prognosis for yeast dermatitis is generally good, however it often requires long-term management of the underlying cause. There is no quick fix. If the underlying condition has been controlled, then the secondary or recurrent yeast infections are reduced. As always in veterinary medicine, there is never a 'one size fits all' approach, and therapy will be tailored based on the severity of disease and responsiveness to treatment.



### **Prevention**

If underlying allergies are present, controlling them is an important first step in the prevention of yeast dermatitis. Working with us to find the best treatment plan for your dog is important, knowing that this plan usually relies on several initiatives at the same time and may evolve over the time. Usually this involves maintenance hygiene of the skin, skin folds and ears using shampoos and ear cleaners.

**To book in for your pet in for a health check, please call us on 01423 228080 or visit [www.clarohillvets.co.uk](http://www.clarohillvets.co.uk)**