

University of California, Davis  
Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital  
Davis, CA 95616

Small Animal Clinic: 530-752-1393  
Dermatology Service

## Information for Clients

### **MALASSEZIA**

#### **Introduction**

*Malassezia pachydermatis* is the name of a common yeast organism that is normal to be found in small numbers on dog and cat skin. *Malassezia* is also commonly found in ear canals and on some mucosal surfaces of the dog and cat. Under certain conditions, this yeast can proliferate and cause clinical disease. *Malassezia* is not contagious to other animals or people. As part of the normal flora, it is only problematic when allowed to overpopulate. Overpopulation usually occurs secondary to an underlying condition that changes the microclimate of the skin or ears. Predisposing skin environmental factors for *Malassezia* include warm, moist, inflamed skin or ears. Dogs with exaggerated skin folds (spaniels, hounds, Chinese Shar Peis) may also be predisposed. Other conditions that are often associated with yeast infections include allergy, hormonal dysfunction, or immune suppression.

#### **Clinical Signs**

*Malassezia* infection can be localized (for example only in the ears or between the toes), or it can be more generalized over a large portion of the body. Most animals are itchy. The degree of itchiness may vary from mild to intense. The itching may not correlate with the severity of the infection as some animals develop a hypersensitivity to the yeast, and cannot tolerate even a mild infection. The skin of the affected animal is often very reddened, and may also be thickened and hyperpigmented (“elephant” skin). Areas of the body most often affected include the ears, groin, in between the toes or footpads, neck and chin area, and axilla or “armpit” area. Some animals with a *Malassezia* infection may also have an unpleasant odor.

#### **Diagnosis**

*Malassezia* is diagnosed by doing a simple in-clinic test called “cytology”. Cytology looks at the cells and organisms present on the surface of the skin or ear canal. Some surface skin debris is applied to a microscope slide and stained with a chemical that stains the yeast organisms bright purple. The slide is then examined under the microscope at 1000X. A few yeast organisms in the ear are considered “normal,” however more than 1-2 yeast organisms per microscopic field when combined with the clinical signs of redness, irritation etc. is considered abnormal. *Malassezia* is very rarely

visualized on normal skin; therefore, even a small number of organisms found on the skin are significant when combined with clinical signs.

## **Treatment**

The treatment for *Malassezia* dermatitis or otitis can be accomplished with topical and/or oral medications. Often, treatment includes a combination of a topical product (such as shampoo, lotion, ointment, wet wipes or spray) and an oral systemic medication. Topical products by themselves are adequate for treatment if the infection is not too severe, or the affected area is small. For more severe or widespread infections, the oral medication is indicated. Some infections can be persistent and difficult to eradicate. Therefore, the medication needs to be continued until all clinical signs have abated and no *Malassezia* organisms are seen on cytologic examination. The usual course of treatment is 30-45 days.

The underlying reason for the *Malassezia* infection needs to be investigated. When the underlying cause is identified, it will need to be addressed, otherwise the *Malassezia* infection will return. In the event an underlying cause cannot be found, or is not treatable (i.e. Shar Pei skin folds!) then a maintenance therapy for *Malassezia* prevention or control will be instituted.

## **Treatment Recommendations**

**Topical medication:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Oral medication:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Progress check:** Please return for a progress check in \_\_\_\_ weeks. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Dermatology Service at (530) 752-1393.