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Foxtails (Grass Awns) in Dogs

Risks, seasons, symptoms, prevention, and when it becomes a veterinary problem

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Quick answer

Foxtails are not just annoying grass seeds. They are barbed plant awns that can latch onto a dog's coat, work into the skin or a body opening, and then migrate deeper instead of backing out. That is why a dog can go from a normal walk to limping, violent sneezing, ear pain, eye irritation, or a draining skin tract surprisingly fast. In practical terms, owners on the Central Coast should treat dry grassy areas as a real seasonal hazard, not a minor grooming issue.

Most dog owners first notice foxtails only after they have already caused a problem. A dog comes back from a hike licking one paw. Another starts shaking one ear over and over. Another begins sneezing hard after running through dry brush. Because the seed head is small, owners often assume the issue is a sticker, a burr, or a little irritation that will work itself out. That assumption is exactly what makes foxtails such a headache. Their shape is designed to travel in one direction.

This guide is built to answer the real owner questions early: what foxtails are, why they are more dangerous than they look, where they usually get dogs, what symptoms matter most, what you can safely do at home, what you should not do, and when the issue needs prompt veterinary care instead of more waiting or more digging. The goal is not drama. The goal is better decisions in the real world.

How foxtails actually cause trouble

A foxtail is the seed head from certain grasses. The important part is not the plant name so much as the design. Each awn has tiny backward-facing barbs. Those barbs catch fur, socks, skin, and plant material easily. On a dog, normal movement does the rest. Walking, flexing the paw, blinking, sniffing, or shaking the head can all ratchet the awn deeper. Unlike a smooth splinter, it does not tend to back out cleanly once it is embedded.

That is why veterinarians worry less about the size of the awn than about the direction it can travel. A foxtail between the toes can move into the soft tissue of the foot. One inhaled through the nose can stay lodged in the nasal passages or migrate farther. One in the ear can set off pain, inflammation, and secondary infection. One trapped under an eyelid can scrape the cornea. The problem is not just local irritation. The problem is migration.



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UC Davis notes that foxtails can cause abscesses and widespread infection as they move into tissue, and that removal is the treatment rather than waiting for them to dissolve on their own. That is the core mindset owners need: assume a buried foxtail is a foreign body that keeps moving until somebody finds and removes it.

Why dogs are more vulnerable than people

Human comparison helps here. If a person walks through dry grass and gets a seed caught in a sock, they usually stop, pull it out, and move on. Dogs are different in three important ways. First, they lead with their nose and face. They push into brush, sniff seed-heavy margins, and investigate the exact places where awns collect. Second, their feet flex constantly, which can work a seed deeper between the toes and pads. Third, their coat hides small plant material well, especially in feathering, armpits, groin, belly fur, and around the ears.

Owners also tend to project human tolerance onto dogs. A person can usually tell you, “something sharp went in my shoe.” A dog just starts licking, shaking, rubbing, or acting off. By the time the sign is obvious, the awn may already be buried. That is why post-walk inspection matters more for dogs than it does for people after the same trail.

When the risk is highest in Santa Barbara

Foxtails are most dangerous once grasses dry out and harden. UC Davis specifically warns that dried, hardened foxtails are especially dangerous during the summer months, while also noting that warm climates can see cases throughout the year. For Santa Barbara and the Central Coast, the practical owner takeaway is simple: once the hillsides and trail edges have shifted from green to dry, brittle, and seed-heavy, your level of caution should go up fast.

That usually means late spring, summer, and early fall are the main danger window for local dogs, especially in open-space trails, vacant lots, field edges, unmanaged lots, and any area with tall annual grass that has gone to seed. The exact start and finish can vary with rainfall and mowing, but the pattern is consistent enough that owners should build a seasonal routine around it rather than relying on luck.

Owner rule of thumb

If you can see dry seed heads brushing your dog’s legs, chest, or face, you are in foxtail country. Shift from “normal walk mode” to “management mode”: shorter leash, cleaner trail line, and a full post-walk inspection.

Where foxtails most often get dogs

Not every body area carries the same risk. The most common trouble spots are the paws, ears, nose, eyes, and thin-skinned areas under the coat. Knowing the pattern helps you inspect faster and catch problems earlier.

The highest-yield inspection zones are easy to remember once you know the pattern:

Paws: between the toes, around the pads, and near the nails, where normal flexion can drive an awn deeper into the foot.

Ears: especially the entrance to the canal, where a dog may suddenly shake the head or paw at one side.

Nose: after intense sniffing in dry grass, where repeated sneezing or one-sided discharge can start fast.

Eyes: under the eyelids, where even a tiny awn can create significant irritation and corneal risk.

Skin and coat: especially armpits, groin, belly, feathering, and other warm thin-skinned areas where an awn can hide before migrating.

Symptoms that deserve attention now, not later

Foxtails are one of those hazards where sudden, one-sided symptoms matter. A dog that abruptly starts shaking only one ear after a field walk is different from a dog with a mild chronic ear issue. A dog that begins forcefully sneezing after plunging nose-first into dry grass is different from a dog with occasional allergies. That abrupt change after exposure is what should put foxtails on your radar.

- Paw signs: limping, obsessive licking, chewing at one foot, swelling between the toes, a pinhole tract, or tenderness when you spread the toes apart.
- Ear signs: repeated head shaking, ear scratching, pain when the ear is touched, head tilt, or obvious one-sided irritation.
- Nose and throat signs: repeated sneezing, reverse sneezing that starts after exposure, pawing at the face, gagging, or discharge from one nostril.
- Eye signs: tearing, redness, squinting, blinking hard, rubbing the face, or sudden light sensitivity.
- Skin signs: a warm lump, a painful area under the coat, a sore that drains and then seems to return, or an abscess that never quite resolves.

Not every case looks dramatic on day one. Some begin with a small limp or a little extra licking, then worsen over the next day or two as swelling builds. That is one reason “let’s just watch it for a week” is often the wrong move with suspected awns.

What owners can do safely at home

Home care is appropriate only when the foxtail is clearly superficial and fully visible, such as a seed caught in the outer coat or sitting loosely at the surface of the fur. In that situation, prompt removal can prevent a much bigger problem.

1. Move your dog into good light and keep them still. A second set of hands helps.
2. Separate the fur carefully so you can see whether the seed is only caught in hair or actually embedded in tissue.
3. If it is loose in the coat, remove it with your fingers, a comb, or tweezers, then inspect the area again.
4. Check nearby fur for additional awns. Dogs often pick up more than one on the same outing.
5. Monitor the area over the next 24 hours for licking, swelling, redness, discharge, or persistent discomfort.

What you should not do is just as important. Do not dig into the ear canal. Do not probe under the eyelid unless you are trained and your dog is truly cooperative. Do not keep fishing around a draining tract because you think you feel the tip. Do not pour oils into the nose hoping the awn will soften and slide out. If you are not certain it came out cleanly, treat it as a veterinary problem.

Do not wait on these signs

Eye pain, severe ear pain, repeated forceful sneezing, any breathing change, or a dog that cannot bear weight on one paw after exposure should move the case out of “home monitoring” and into same-day veterinary territory.

Common mistakes and myths

The most common owner mistake is assuming a foxtail is basically a burr. Burrs are annoying. Foxtails can be dangerous because they migrate. Another mistake is focusing only on the visible seed and not the pathway. If the dog was charging through seed-heavy grass, there may be more than one awn on board. A third mistake is looking only at the coat and forgetting the ears, nose, eyes, and feet.

- Myth: “It will work itself out.” Reality: the barbed structure often makes the problem move in the wrong direction.
- Myth: “If the limp is better tomorrow, we’re fine.” Reality: some embedded awns quiet down briefly and then show up later as swelling or a draining tract.
- Myth: “I can flush or soften it and avoid the vet.” Reality: sensitive locations often require proper visualization and removal tools.
- Myth: “Short-haired dogs don’t really have this problem.” Reality: coat type changes where awns catch, not whether they can enter feet, ears, eyes, or nose.

Practical prevention for real Santa Barbara dogs

The best prevention plan is boring, which is exactly why it works. You do not need a complicated system. You need route selection, seasonal awareness, and a fast inspection habit.

- Choose cleaner path lines. Stay in the center of maintained trails and avoid brushing the edges where dry seed heads lean into the travel lane.
- Use a shorter leash in seed-heavy stretches. The point is not control for its own sake; it is keeping your dog from plunging nose-first into dry cover.
- Keep the yard cut down. VCA specifically recommends mowing regularly and avoiding tall grass areas. Yard management counts just as much as trail management.
- Ask for practical seasonal grooming. Feet, lower legs, feathering, armpits, belly fur, and around the ears are the usual collection zones.
- Consider booties for brush-loving dogs when the terrain makes sense. They are not magic, but they can reduce paw exposure for certain dogs.
- Make the inspection routine automatic. The owner who always checks after exposure catches problems much earlier than the owner who waits for symptoms.

The 30-second post-walk inspection

This does not need to become a full grooming session. It is a quick hazard check while the outing is still fresh in your mind.

- Paws: spread the toes, check between pads, around the nails, and along the fur where debris mats up.
- Ears: look at the outer ear and the entrance to the canal. Sudden pain or shaking means stop and reassess.
- Eyes and face: look for tearing, squinting, or frantic rubbing.
- Nose and mouth: note unusual sneezing, pawing at the face, gagging, or drooling.
- Chest, armpits, groin, belly, and tail feathering: run your hands through the coat and remove any visible awns before they work inward.

The routine matters because time matters. A seed caught in fur is usually easy. A seed that has been driven under the skin for twelve or twenty-four more hours is a different problem.

Edge cases owners should know about

A few dogs deserve extra caution. Long-coated dogs and dogs with feathering collect more plant material. Spaniels and other ear-heavy dogs may trap awns near the ear opening more easily. Dogs that live for off-leash brush crashing are obvious candidates, but calm leash walkers are not exempt if the trail edges are full of dry seed heads. Puppies can also be tougher to inspect because they wiggle, panic, and mouth at your hands, which makes a careful check harder even when the risk is real.

Another edge case is the dog that seems fine immediately after the walk but develops a non-healing lump or draining tract days later. Owners do not always connect that delayed skin issue back to the original grassy outing. A recurring sore between the toes or on the body should keep a migrating foreign body on the differential list, especially in foxtail season.

When this becomes a veterinary issue

The veterinary line should be clear. Suspected awns in the eye, ear canal, or nose are not good DIY projects. A dog with significant pain, persistent sneezing, a head tilt, one-nostril discharge, marked swelling, a draining tract, or any breathing change needs professional evaluation. The same goes for a dog that keeps limping or licking after you removed what you thought was the only visible seed.

Veterinary care is not overkill here. Sensitive locations may require magnification, sedation, flushing, or instruments that owners do not have at home. And if an awn has migrated, partial removal is not the win people think it is. The goal is complete removal and management of any secondary inflammation or infection.

Bottom line

Foxtails are one of the most preventable painful problems many California dogs run into. The hazard is not the plant looking scary. The hazard is the barbed one-way structure that lets the seed keep traveling. Once you understand that, the owner strategy gets straightforward: avoid the worst dry grassy exposure, inspect right after the walk, remove what is loose in the coat, and move quickly when symptoms point to an embedded awn.

Good handling starts with understanding what your dog is actually experiencing. A dog that is licking one paw, shaking one ear, or forcefully sneezing after a run through dry grass is not being dramatic. That dog may be telling you there is a foreign body already on the move.

Sources used for the guide

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