

Anal Sac Disease in Cats

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What are the anal sacs?

The anal sacs are two small pouches located on either side of the anus at approximately the four o'clock and eight o'clock positions. The walls of the sac are lined with a large number of sebaceous (sweat) glands that produce a foul smelling fluid. The fluid is stored within the anal sacs, which release their contents to the outside through a small duct or canal that opens just inside the anus. The anal sacs are commonly called "anal glands" although this terminology is not accurate.

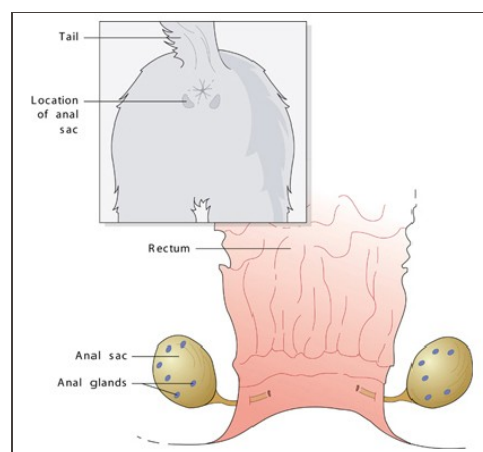
What is their function?

The anal sac secretion contains chemicals that act as territorial markers, or "calling cards". The secretions are similar to those produced by a skunk, which are used to repel enemies and alert other animals to their presence. Although cats can use their anal sacs for the same purpose, most domestic cats have no need to repel predators in this manner. A small amount of anal fluid is usually squeezed out by muscular contractions whenever the cat passes a bowel movement, providing a distinctive odor (or individual 'scent signature') to the feces.

What diseases affect the anal sacs?

The anal sacs or their ducts can become inflamed or infected. If the anal sac ducts become swollen, the fluid cannot be emptied properly from the sacs. In this situation, the sacs become *impacted*, and the fluid becomes thicker and darker in color.

Bacteria that are normally present in the feces can readily travel up the ducts and enter the sacs. In normal situations, the bacteria are flushed out when the secretions are expelled during a bowel movement. However, if the sacs are impacted, the fluid does not empty normally, and the impacted fluid provides an ideal medium for bacterial growth. If the anal sacs become infected in this manner, the fluid becomes bloody and eventually the sacs become filled with pus, forming an *anal sac abscess*, a hot, painful swelling on one or both sides of the rectum. Left untreated, the pressure will continue to build until eventually the overlying skin bursts open, allowing the pus to drain out in a condition called an *anal sac rupture*. The pus can spread into the surrounding tissues and cause severe damage to the rectum and anus.



What are the clinical signs of anal sac disease?

Symptoms of anal sac disease depend on the nature and severity of the problem. The first signs include scooting or dragging the anal area along the ground and licking or biting at the rectum or the tail. Anal sac disease is very painful and even a normally gentle cat may scratch or bite if you attempt to look at the affected area. If one or both anal sacs become abscessed, the area beside the rectum may be swollen; if the abscess ruptures, you will see a bloody or sticky discharge draining beside or beneath the rectum.

In some cases, the cat had an episode of diarrhea or digestive upset a week or two before the clinical signs of anal sac disease became evident.

How is anal sac disease treated?

The treatment for *impaction* is to express the sacs and flush out the solidified material. For *infection*, the sacs must be expressed and antibiotics administered to kill the bacteria. If the sacs **abscess or rupture**, surgical treatment may be necessary. Most cats will require pain relief medications for several days until the swelling and inflammation have subsided.

Is the condition likely to recur?

It is not very common for cats to have recurrent anal sac disease. However, some overweight cats have chronic anal sac problems. The anal sacs of obese cats do not empty well; thus these cats are predisposed to recurrent problems. Some cats may benefit from an increased fiber in their diet. If a cat has several episodes of anal sac disease, and diet does not relieve the problem, the anal sacs can be removed surgically. Because our domesticated cats have no need to mark their territory, their removal will not adversely affect your cat.

What are the potential surgical complications?

Surgery requires general anesthesia, which always carries some degree of risk, whether the patient is a cat or a person. Removal of the anal sacs is a delicate and specialized surgery. Some veterinarians prefer to refer these patients to a board-certified surgeon.

Some cats will experience lack of bowel control after the surgery. They may drop fecal balls while walking or experience fecal incontinence when they sleep or lie down. This occurs because the nerves that control the muscles surrounding the anus are located near the anal sacs and may sustain minor damage during the removal of the anal sacs or become inflamed as part of the post-operative healing process. In most cases, this is a temporary problem that will resolve within a few days to a few weeks after surgery. Unfortunately, some rare cases never improve, resulting in the need for special diapers or other accommodations for fecal incontinence. Your veterinarian will thoroughly discuss the risks and benefits of surgery with you.

What other problems can develop with the anal sacs?

Some cats appear to have anal sac ducts that do not close well. These cats are constantly draining anal sac fluid, leaving an unpleasant, lingering odor in the home. If your cat has this problem, you may elect to have the anal sacs surgically removed.