

VISION IMPAIRMENT: What to Watch for and How to Help Protect Your Pet's Eyes

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

Who can resist puppy dog (or kitty cat) eyes? But did you know that those eyes may be telling you more than “I love you,” “pet me,” or “I want a treat”? They could be sending subtle clues that your pet is experiencing a threat to her eye health.

How to Tell If Your Pet Can't See

“Many pets will create an impressive mental map at home,” cautions board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist Dr. Brady Beale, clinical instructor in ophthalmology and chief medical communications officer at PennVet at the University of Pennsylvania. “Only when taken from their familiar environment do signs of vision loss become apparent.”

Signs of impaired vision can include:

- Reluctance to climb or descend stairs
- Hesitation to move in low-light areas
- Bumping into stationary objects
- Failure to locate treats on the ground
- Pawing at the eye(s)
- Noticeable changes in the eye(s), including squinting, increased tear production and discharge, redness or other alteration in color, and cloudiness
- Loss of litterbox training (in cats)

Causes and Treatability of Vision Loss in Pets

Vision loss in pets can have many causes and impact pets of every age. Common conditions, besides old age, that can lead to vision loss in pets include:

- **Glaucoma**, which is high pressure in the eye. Medicated eye drops and surgery (in severe cases) can treat this condition, but it usually requires close monitoring to reduce pain and vision loss.
- A **cataract**, or cloudy white opacity in the lens, which can be surgically replaced to help restore some vision, but many pets adapt well. Of note, while we often think of cataracts as a natural part of old age, they can also result from diabetes in dogs, and certain breeds are predisposed to an inherited type.
- **Retinal degeneration**, which takes many forms and can cause gradual or sudden vision impairment. As of now, no reliable treatment is available to reverse this degeneration, but research into effective treatments is under way in humans and animals.

Other factors can contribute to vision loss:

- Genetics
- Trauma
- Toxins, certain medications, and nutrient deficiencies
- Illnesses including viral and fungal infections, diabetes, elevated blood pressure, and tumors
- Neurologic disease

Some eye damage is irreversible, but treatments may be available depending on type of illness or injury and its severity. Treating an underlying

condition may help relieve the effect on your pet's vision or reduce the severity of future damage. In some cases, removing the eye might be the best option to help ensure your pet's comfort.

Diagnosis

Describe to your vet any changes you've noticed in your pet's behavior or eyes. After taking a complete history, your vet will give your pet a thorough exam, looking for signs of disease that may contribute to vision loss, and an exam to check for abnormalities in the eye itself. Your vet may assess your pet's vision by watching her move throughout the examination room, track



hand or object motion, or navigate simple mazes formed by objects in the room.

If your veterinarian detects a complicated problem with your pet's vision, he or she may refer you to a veterinary ophthalmologist who specializes in assessing and treating diseases of the eye. The ophthalmology specialist will perform a thorough examination of the eye and surrounding tissue using a variety of diagnostic equipment and tests.

Eye Protection

According to Dr. Beale, "daily monitoring for comfort and normal vision is the best way to help ensure healthy eyes."

In addition, to help safeguard your pet's eyesight, you can:

- Contact your vet right away if you notice any changes in your pet's eyes or vision
- Keep the hair around your pet's eyes trimmed
- Ask your veterinarian about using protective eyewear if your dog is exposed to long periods of sunlight
- Keep car windows closed when

- your pet rides along
- Avoid exposing your pet to chemicals and toxins
- Use a short leash outdoors to prevent conflicts with other dogs or contact with environmental threats, such as low branches or prickly shrubbery
- Keep your cat indoors (or walk her on a leash)

Keeping an "eye" out for signs of impaired vision in your pet and seeking help from your veterinary team can help safeguard your pet's vision. If your pet experiences irreversible vision impairment, however, help her adapt to relying on senses other than sight—these other senses are up to the challenge of helping her maintain a fun and fulfilling life.

Before Andrea Vardaro Tucker, a board-certified editor in the life sciences and HealthyPet magazine copy editor, became a pet parent to her now-9-year-old West Highland White Terrier, she grew up with a dog who was visually impaired during the last few years of her life.

TIPS FOR LIVING WITH A BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED PET

"Receiving a diagnosis of blindness in their pet can be one of the most frightening things a family can hear," Dr. Beale says. But, she adds, pets have an "amazing ability to compensate without vision using hearing, temperature, smell, and a myriad of other cues."

Help your vision-impaired pet navigate her environment by:

- **Keeping her water and food in the same location (and for cats, not moving litterboxes)**
- **Decluttering and not rearranging furniture**

- **Sticking to a routine**
- **Training your pet to rely on voice commands and warnings**
- **Considering crate training or gates to minimize exposure to hazards**
- **Speaking to your pet before touching her**
- **Covering hardwood floors and uncarpeted stairs with rugs or runners**
- **Stimulating her other senses through different scents, textures, and sounds**

✳ *For more tips plus some inspirational stories, visit blindtails.com.*

VET SPOTLIGHT



Dr. Beth Luebbering

*The Pet Center, Ltd,
Columbia, MO*

Thanks to Allison Miranda from Columbia for submitting this "rocking" story:

"Dr. Beth Luebbering has been our vet for about 4 years. We found her when we moved from California and cannot imagine not having her take care of our pets!

Last August, when our black Lab mix, Dodger, suddenly became ill, we took him in to see Dr. Luebbering. After a series of tests, she found out that our quirky dog had swallowed a corn cob! Dr. Luebbering performed emergency surgery and removed the cob.

The surgery being a success is not the only reason we love Dr. Luebbering so much. It was also the care she gave us and Dodger following his surgery. Dodger had a lengthy hospital stay while he recovered, and Dr. Luebbering was there for every step of the recovery process. Day in and day out, this dedicated vet came to the clinic—even on the weekend and her days off—to personally supervise Dodger's care. She would call after every visit to update us.

I know that doctors often put in extra hours for their patients, but I truly believe that Dr. Luebbering went above and beyond to make sure Dodger got healthy again.

Three months later, when Dodger swallowed a large amount of small rocks, Dr. Luebbering once again came to our rescue and got all those rocks out! She even gave up more of her own time on Thanksgiving Day to give him one last x-ray to make sure all was good.

Here we are 1 year later, and Dodger has not swallowed any odd objects since.

We are forever grateful for our vet and want to give her a little spotlight in *HealthyPet* magazine because she so deserves it!"

To share your story, see the inside back cover (after the Cute Pet Contest).