

# HOW TO HELP A PET *with* HEARING LOSS

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

Is your puppy or kitten difficult to train? Does your senior pet seem to have selective hearing? “Listen up” to learn the possible signs that hearing impairment could be responsible and how you and your veterinarian can work together if your pet’s having trouble hearing.

## Signs Your Pet May Be Hearing Impaired

Unless a pet is born with *bilateral deafness*, which means he can’t hear out of either ear, his decline in hearing will probably be progressive and difficult to spot until he stops responding to normal social cues and stimuli. You might notice that he:

- Seemingly ignores verbal and other auditory commands
- Stops responding to familiar and unfamiliar sounds (like the doorbell, garage door, or squeak toy)
- Has trouble determining where sounds are coming from (typical in pets with unilateral deafness, which affects just one ear)
- Sleeps more and is difficult to wake up
- Snaps when startled by touch
- Barks more or his vocalizations sound different
- Doesn’t train well using verbal cues

## Causes and Diagnosis of Hearing Loss

If you suspect that your pet might not be hearing as well as he used to (or that a new pet doesn’t respond to sound), schedule an appointment with your veterinarian. He or she will ask what signs your pet is showing, then use an *otoscope* to look inside his ears. If your vet can’t find a clear cause, he or she might order additional tests, such as *brainstem auditory-evoked response*, or BAER, testing. Based on the findings, your vet may diagnose your pet with

**conduction or sensorineural deafness.** Pets can *acquire* both types of hearing loss, meaning impairment develops later in life, but most cases of *congenital* deafness (in which pets are born with hearing loss) are the result of sensorineural causes.

For the most part, in *conduction deafness*, something like a foreign body or growth, excess earwax, or infection will stop sound from reaching the inner ear—partially or entirely. Often, once a veterinarian removes a blockage, cleans the ear, or prescribes antibiotic treatment, the pet’s hearing eventually improves.

Occasionally, chronic infections result in *stenosis*, or narrowing, of the ear canal, which can be treated surgically.

In the absence of some type of blockage, your veterinarian may suspect *sensorineural deafness*. With this type of hearing loss, nerve cells within the ear (known as *hair cells*) die, resulting in permanent deafness. Some causes are:

- Genetics
- Chronic infections or illness
- Noise trauma
- Drug toxicity
- General anesthesia
- Advanced age



**Tips for Living With a Deaf Pet**

Dogs and cats with acquired deafness adapt well with some extra help from their parents. “Even pets born bilaterally deaf can have a great life with the right owner, but it takes a very special person,” says Dr. George M. Strain, a professor of neuroscience in the Department of Comparative Biomedical Sciences at the School of Veterinary Medicine at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Hearing-impaired pets depend on their other senses, so you’ll want to learn to communicate with your dog or cat **nonverbally** or through **touch**.

**Teach your pet hand signals.** According to Mikkel Becker, lead animal trainer for Fear Free Pets, “this helps the pet to understand what you’re communicating when words no longer function.” When possible, transfer cues from verbal to nonverbal before your pet completely loses his hearing by making a visual signal, such as a hand position or arm movement, followed a few seconds later by your pet’s verbal cue. “Soon, when

these are paired together, the pet starts to anticipate what is going to be asked, and he’ll respond to the visual signal alone,” Mikkel explains. (See the sidebar below for more.)

**A professional trainer experienced in working with deaf pets may be able to help you communicate even more effectively with your pet.**

**“Tap” into your pet’s sense of touch.**

If you want to get a sleeping pet’s attention, indicate that you’re nearby by gently nudging him with your foot or tapping the floor or other surface before you touch him (and don’t allow infants or young children to touch the pet before you do this). Other ideas include gently tugging his leash to communicate while taking a walk or placing your hand on his back or shoulder to get his attention (when he’s awake). You can also talk with your vet about whether a vibration collar (an electric collar that vibrates when the pet performs a behavior correctly, not to be confused with a shock collar) might benefit your pet. Dr. Kim E. Knowles, a veterinary

neurologist at the Veterinary Neurological Center in Phoenix, Arizona, says that parents of pets with congenital deafness might consider using these collars along with hand signals during training.

**Keep a close eye—and ear—on your pet.** Increased vigilance is essential with deaf pets, who are much more likely to get lost or hit by cars. Prevent wandering by keeping your pet on a leash or in a fenced-in yard. Updated identification tags and a microchip are absolutely essential for those who can’t hear.

“Use a tag on [your pet’s] collar to identify him as deaf,” Dr. Knowles adds. “If a stranger finds him, the person will understand the lack of response.”

Remember that both your pet—and you—can adapt well to even permanent hearing loss.

*Andrea Vardaro Tucker is a board-certified editor in the life sciences and HealthyPet magazine copy editor. Her childhood dog, who developed hearing loss in her senior years, inspired this article.*

**STEPS FOR TEACHING YOUR PET HAND SIGNALS**

1. Develop your own signals or use American Sign Language (ASL), and ensure everyone interacting with your pet uses identical signs.\*
2. Start with a signal (a thumbs-up would work) to indicate “good job,” and follow it with a treat or other reward.
3. Move a treat from your pet’s nose to your eyes to encourage eye contact. Once he’s looking at you, sign “good job” and offer him the treat. Phase out the treat by mimicking this

process with just an empty hand. Finally, you’ll be able to perform only a slight hand movement toward your face.

4. Give a hand signal just before your pet performs a desired behavior or engages in an activity so he associates that sign with the behavior. Indicate “good job,” and give a treat or reward, which you’ll eventually phase out.

\* Check out Dr. Strain’s guide for hand commands at [lsu.edu/deafness/Hand%20Commands.htm](http://lsu.edu/deafness/Hand%20Commands.htm).



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