

Dry Eye in Dogs

Overview

- Dry eye is a painful condition that develops when a dog is unable to produce a normal amount of tears.
- It usually affects both eyes, causing them to become dry and inflamed.
- Most commonly, dry eye is immune mediated, meaning it's caused by the immune system attacking the tear glands.
- Dry eye can't be cured, but can usually be well managed with eye drops and care at home.
- Book an appointment with your vet if you notice symptoms of dry eye or any problems with your dog's eyes.

What is dry eye?



This dog has dry eye. Note the sticky discharge and lack of shine in his eyes.

Dry eye is condition that develops when there is a severe lack of tear production. It's an extremely painful condition that left untreated, can lead to [conjunctivitis](#), [eye ulcers](#), and in severe cases, permanent scarring, or even loss of an eye. In most cases, dry eye in dogs is immune mediated. This means that a fault in the immune system causes the body to destroy its own tear glands. The damage tends to be gradual over a period of months to

years, so if the condition is diagnosed and treated early enough, it can usually be slowed down with medication.

In some rare cases, dry eye can be caused by certain hormonal problems (for example [hypothyroidism](#) and [diabetes](#)), as a side effect of certain medicines, or by a problem with the nerves that lead to the tear glands ('neurogenic dry eye').

Symptoms

Dry eye tends to develop gradually and cause symptoms that get worse over time. It usually affects both eyes (one eye is often affected first or more severely), and causes symptoms such as:

- [A thick, sticky discharge](#)
- [Redness in and around the eyes](#)
- [Painful, irritated eyes](#) (you may notice your dog closing their eyes more than usual, blinking a lot, or rubbing their face)
- Cloudy/dull eyes with a lack of shine
- Frequent eye infections
- Frequent [eye ulcers](#)

When to contact your vet

Book an appointment with your vet if you think your dog might have dry eye, or you notice any of the symptoms listed above. Even if your dog doesn't have the exact symptoms listed above, it's always best to contact your vet if you are concerned - eyes are too important to leave to chance.

Diagnosis

Your vet will be able to diagnose dry eye based on your dog's symptoms and by performing a 'Schirmer Tear Test' (STT). The STT is a painless procedure that involves placing a very small strip of paper between your dog's eyelid and eye. The strip measures the amount of tears each eye is producing, and a normal result is above 15mm/minute (anything below this could indicate dry eye).

Treatment

Dry eye is often a condition that requires lifelong treatment. Each case is slightly different, so your dog will have an individual treatment plan prepared by your vet. They will need regular vet check-ups and medication adjustments as necessary. Your dog's treatment is likely to include:

Ciclosporin eye drops - the most common treatment for dry eye is Ciclosporin eye drops ('Optimmune'). Ciclosporin works by calming the immune system and preventing it from destroying the tear glands. It can take 2-8 weeks to take full effect, and if it is successful, should be given for life. The sooner ciclosporin is given, the more likely it is to work. Unfortunately, treatment is unlikely to be successful if the entire tear gland has been destroyed. If Ciclosporin eye drops don't work for your dog, your vet may decide to try a stronger formulation or another medication such as Tacrolimus.

False tears - you will need to give your dog false tears to replace the tears they are unable to produce. Initially they will need them extremely regularly (every 1-2 hours), but once their dry eye is under control, it may be possible to reduce the frequency.

Video: 'How to apply eye drops for your dog'

Regular eye wiping - an important part of your dog's treatment will be keeping their eye's clean and free from infection. Use cotton wool pads soaked in warm water to remove any dried discharge from their eyes at least twice a day. Always wet the discharge to give it a chance to loosen before trying to remove it.

Surgery - if your dog's eyes don't improve with medication, your vet may suggest an operation called a 'xx'. The aim of this surgery is to redirect a tube that carries saliva into the eye, so that saliva keeps the surface of the eye moist. This surgery can be very effective, but in some dogs, saliva can be quite irritating to the surface of the eye. For this reason, parotid duct transpositions are usually a last resort.

Enucleation - if your dog has severe dry eye that is unresponsive to treatment, or is causing a lot of pain, it may be necessary to consider enucleation (eye removal). If you are considering this, speak to your vet for advice about their quality of life, and [caring for a blind dog](#).

Other

- [Antibiotic](#) eye drops aren't a standard part of treating dry eye, but may be needed from time to time if your dog develops an eye infection because of their condition. If your vet gives your dog antibiotic eye drops it's very important to follow the instructions and complete the course. This will make sure the infection is fully treated and doesn't return.
- [A buster collar](#) may be necessary to stop your dog from rubbing their eyes while their medication takes effect.
- Your dog may need other medications if their dry is caused by another condition.

Download or print our [medication planner](#)

Outlook

As long as treatment begins before your dog's entire tear gland has been destroyed, they are likely to respond well and stay under control for many years. However, if your dog starts treatment too late (once their tear gland has been destroyed), medication is less likely to work. If medication is unsuccessful, you will need to consider other options such as parotid duct transposition or even [enucleation \(surgery to remove their eyes\)](#). Most dogs with symptoms severe enough to warrant enucleation are already [blind](#), so cope well without their eyes, and go on to live happy, pain free lives. In extreme cases, or where surgery isn't possible, you may need to consider whether it is kindest to [put your dog to sleep](#) to stop them from suffering.

Breeds prone to dry eye

Most cases of dry eye are inherited (passed from parent to puppy), which is why it's particularly common in certain breeds such as:

- [Cavalier King Charles Spaniel](#)

- [Pug](#)
- [West Highland White Terrier](#)
- [Yorkshire Terrier](#)
- [Shih Tzu](#)

Prevention

We strongly recommend not breeding from a dog that has been diagnosed with dry eye, even if their condition is well controlled. In addition to this, if you are considering getting a dog it is important to research any potential health problems in the breed you are considering (including dry eye).

Cost

Dry eye can become very expensive to treat, especially because it is a condition that needs lifelong treatment. It's very important to speak openly to your vet about your finances, the cost of treatment, as well as what you think is right for your dog. There is often several treatment options so if one doesn't work for you and your pet then the vet may be able to offer another.

Always consider [insuring your dog](#) as soon as you get them, before any signs of illness start. This will ensure you have all the support you need to care for them.

FAQ's

Is dry eye painful? Yes, left untreated, dry eye is often extremely painful.

Some humans have described dry eye to feel like there is sand in their eye.

Fortunately, with treatment dogs with dry eye can live a pain free, happy life.

Can dry eye be cured? No, dry eye can't be cured, but fortunately it can often be well managed with treatment from your vet.

Can I use human lubricant eye drops on my dog? Not all human lubricant eye drops are safe for dogs, so always speak to your vet before giving your dog a new drop that hasn't been specifically prescribed for them.

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