

Blindness in dogs

Overview

- Depending on the cause, blindness can develop very suddenly, or very gradually.
- Most dogs are very good at adapting to gradual blindness and as a result, it can be surprisingly difficult to notice. Sudden blindness is much more obvious and most dogs find it difficult to adapt.
- There are many causes of blindness – some are treatable, some are not.
- Book an appointment with your vet if you suspect your dog is losing their sight.



This dog has cataracts in both eyes.

How can I tell if my dog is blind?

Signs to look out for include:

- Changes in the appearance of the eye
- Clumsiness
- Not wanting to go out at night

- Being easily startled and nervous
- Bumping into people, walls or furniture
- Getting lost outside
- Walking slowly and cautiously
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Being unable to find toys, balls, food dishes

Causes

Possible causes of blindness include:

Cataracts. Changes to the lens inside the eye(s); common in older dogs and diabetics.

Glaucoma. Increased pressure inside the eye.

Uveitis. Inflammation inside the eye.

Retinal disease. Disease at the back of the eye such as retinal detachment, SARDS and PRA.

Optic nerve disease. A problem with the nerve that connects the brain to the eye.

Collie eye anomaly. An inherited problem that can affect Collie breeds.

Brain disease. Such as a bleed, stroke, tumour or infection.

General disease. Diseases in another part of the body can sometimes cause blindness e.g. diabetes.

Serious eye injuries. Serious injuries to the front, back or whole eye can cause blindness.

Tumours in the eye. Tumours in and around the eye can cause blindness.

Breed specific causes. Some breeds of dog are prone to developing certain conditions that can cause blindness; check out our breed cards for more information.

Gradual vs sudden loss of vision

Blindness can develop suddenly or gradually depending the cause.

Gradual loss of vision.

It can be surprisingly difficult to notice a gradual loss of vision because dogs are good at adapting. You may notice behaviour changes – they might find it harder to see in dim light, bump into items lying around the house and struggle in unfamiliar places. Dogs that lose their vision gradually often adapt well and lead a very happy life.

Sudden loss of vision.

If your dog has suddenly gone blind, the symptoms will be much more obvious. They are likely to be frightened, stand still, walk very cautiously and bump into things. If your dog has suddenly lost their vision, it's important to consider their quality of life when deciding on a treatment plan with your vet. Sadly, it may be kinder to put your dog to sleep if they are struggling to cope.

When to contact your vet

Contact your vet for an appointment if you notice any changes with your dog's eyes, or if you think they are having problems with their vision. Some causes of blindness are reversible and the sooner treatment is given, the better the chance of regaining vision.

You know your dog best. Contact your vet if you're concerned.

Caring for a blind dog

If you've been told your pet is losing their sight, or if you're thinking about adopting a blind pet, there are some simple things you can do to help them adjust.

Keep your home the same

Don't make any sudden changes to the layout of your home - your pet will gradually learn to find their way around furniture and through doorways. Dogs often adapt so well it's as if they have their sight back! Dogs also use their sense of smell much more than we do.

If you do need to make a change in your home, guide them around the new layout several times to help them learn the new route through the room. You can also leave a radio playing softly near where they sleep. The sound coming from the same place will help them to orientate themselves and 'map' the house.

Keep their food and water bowls in the same place

Moving your dog's food and water bowl somewhere new will confuse them. If you need to move their things, guide them to the new location a few times to help them adjust.

Proof your home

Take another look at your home and work out if there any hazards for your dog. Think about removing any furniture with sharp edges or pad the corners. Make sure wires and other trip hazards are tucked away and your pet can't accidentally bump into anything hot or dangerous, like a wood burning stove or fireplace.

Be their lookout on walks and in the garden

Outside the house, keep a lookout for anything that might be dangerous for your dog, i.e. low hanging branches, thorns or uneven surfaces. Make sure your garden is safe and try a wind chime near the back door to help them 'map' out the area and guide them when they want to come back in.

Ring a bell

When you take your dog for a walk, try wearing a small bell or a rattle. This 'jingle' will help your dog to know where you are. You could also try this around your home if your pet likes to know where you are. If you have another dog, try attaching a small bell to their collar, your blind dog may use them as a guide (cat collar bells are ideal).

Keep them on the lead

It's best to keep your dog on a lead during walks. Only let them off in safe, secure spaces. You might want to check the area for potential dangers to make sure your dog will be safe. Let other people know that your dog can't see so they don't reach out suddenly and startle them. Harnesses tend to be better than collars because they allow better control when steering away from hazards.

Try new toys

If your dog has lost interest in their old toys, or is struggling to play the games they used to, make the most of their excellent sense of hearing and smell. You could try a rubber ball with a bell inside it, or a scent-based game.

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