

# Blindness

Unfortunately, like humans, pets can lose their sight. Causes of blindness include retinal disease with no known treatment, glaucoma, cataracts, retinal detachment, serious eye injuries and a variety of other diseases.

## **Your Pet's Adjustment**

Vision in cats and dogs is quite different from ours. They have better night vision and peripheral vision than we do, but their ability to focus and see fine details is less developed. Also, they do not have well developed color vision. Able to utilize their senses of hearing and smell very efficiently, our pets are less dependent on vision than we are. Because of this, loss of vision in cats and dogs is less traumatic compared to loss of vision in people.

Pets will not feel sorry for themselves and usually adapt very well to the loss of vision. Those that become blind seem to undergo a 1-2 month period of adaptation during which time many changes occur. They will bump into things, which can be a very difficult time for you and your pet, but this will pass with time. Over 95% of blind pets readily memorize the layout of their home and yard and can function normally or near normally with vision deficits. It does take time for them to learn to get around using their other senses. They will make happy pets with some help from you to make their life a little easier.

## **Helpful Recommendations**

Here are a few guidelines to provide better care for the blind pet:

- Memory is used to negotiate the house. Avoid changing the environment, such as moving furniture or food/water bowls. If your pet is placed in a new environment, give him or her time to adjust to the new surroundings. Be careful of stairways, open doors and objects that could injure your pet.

- Teach your pet to walk on a harness or lead, so they can be exercised safely. Choke collars are discouraged. Encourage exercise, whether in a fenced yard or on a leash to prevent excessive weight gain. Never let your pet out without supervision unless in a fenced yard.
- Encourage them to use their other senses to compensate for vision loss. Buy noisy toys or toys that have a distinct recognizable odor. Some people also get a companion animal that the blind pet can follow around using the sense of hearing and smell.
- Behavioral changes (aggression, depression, fear) can sometimes be observed with sudden blindness. Avoid stressing or scaring blind pets. Instruct family members to vocalize the pet's name and approach slowly. The pet's fear usually passes with time, as the he or she learns to adjust to the blindness.
- Most causes of blindness are not painful, so the quality of life for your pet is good. If pain is involved it will cause the pet to be depressed. Other signs to watch for are associated with changes in the appearance of the eye, such as reddening of the whites of the eye, large amounts of discharge and scratching or rubbing of the eye.
- Confining your pet to a smaller area initially and then gradually expanding the region can be helpful. This allows your pet to memorize one area at a time and then slowly add to his or her mental map.
- Keep furniture as consistent as possible. Even small things like putting your chair back under the table after meals can help your pet tremendously. Consider padding the edges of sharp furniture with something like bubble wrap while your pet is first learning.
- Small items like toys left around can be confusing.

- Stairs can be one of the more difficult obstacles for a newly blind pet to master. Initially a barrier (such as a baby gate) in front of the stairs will be necessary to prevent him or her from falling. Using different scents on the top and bottom stair can help to alert your pet to location. Treats can be placed on steps for encouragement while you are working with your pet. Be patient during the learning process!
- Provide a “home base” for your pet that he or she can use to reorient if lost. Food and/or water dishes work well. Recirculating water fountains provide noise in a constant location to orient from.
- Avoid picking up a small pet and then placing him or her down in a new location. This can be very confusing!
- Ask people to introduce themselves to your pet by allowing him or her to smell their hand first. This will help to prevent your pet from becoming startled and potentially reacting badly out of fear.
- Provide a lot of positive reinforcement in the form of verbal praise and touching. Blind pets need your encouragement and love more than ever. A temporary, but often frightening adjustment phase is normal after losing vision.
- Socialization is even more important after vision loss—especially for puppies!

## **Outdoors**

- When outside, wind chimes can be used to help guide the way, as can different textures such as cedar chips or decorative stones/bricks.
- If you have a hot tub or pool, a cover or barrier is **ESSENTIAL**.
- A blind pet should never be in an unfenced area without direct supervision and a leash. Consider an invisible fence if you have an outdoor pet and no fence.

- If you have a balcony make certain your pet cannot fit between the rails. Use plexiglass over the vertical supports if necessary to prevent your pet from getting through.

### **Focus on the senses they do have**

- A pet that is both blind and deaf can still feel vibration when you walk, so don't be afraid to walk with a "heavy foot."
- Mild scents can be used to mark different rooms in the house. You can use different candles in each room or hang different potpourri sachets on each doorknob.
- Use textured rugs or throw pillows to mark different areas.
- Use bells or jingling tags on your other pets. This will alert your blind pet to their presence and make it easier for him or her to follow them.
- Purchase toys that vibrate, smell, move or make noise to make them easier for your pet to locate.

Blind cats and dogs can have a good quality of life and make very happy pets as long as you follow these few guidelines.

For more information on this subject, speak to the veterinarian who is treating your pet.