



OPHTHALMOLOGY REFERRALS

Miss Sally Turner | MA VetMB DVOphtal MRCVS | RCVS Specialist in Veterinary Ophthalmology

Living with your blind pet

Your pet has been diagnosed with a condition which will or already has resulted in blindness. Obviously this is very upsetting for you and you will be worried about how he or she will cope. Firstly the majority of blind pets adapt extremely well to lead full and happy lives. Obviously they have lost one of their senses, but sight to them is not so important as it is to us. They rely on their senses of smell and hearing far more than we do. Just think about how they behave when they meet someone new. We might say – what did he look like? Whereas your dog or cat will think – what did he smell like? Remember how they always sniff something unfamiliar.

What has caused the blindness?

There are many potential causes of blindness. Some of these can be treated but not all. Some of the common causes are listed below:

Retinal disease

Progressive retinal atrophy (PRA) is an inherited problem which is common in some breeds of dog. It is occasionally seen in cats. Animals are usually affected in early to middle age. Initially they have problems seeing properly at night but gradually vision deteriorates such that they become completely blind. They often develop cataracts as well.

Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration (SARD) is sometimes seen in dogs. The retinal cells suddenly die away and vision is lost very quickly

Hypertension in cats – high blood pressure causes damage to the retina and blood vessels resulting in retinal detachments and blindness.

Glaucoma

This is a raised pressure within the eye usually due to impaired drainage of fluid (aqueous) from within the eye. It is a painful condition which if not controlled leads to total blindness. Treatment is possible in some cases, but if advanced removal of the affected eye is sometimes needed to alleviate the pain.

Cataracts

The lens is normally transparent, but if it becomes opaque this is a cataract. Some are treatable with surgery to remove the opacity and restore vision, but in some pets this is not possible. Blindness develops gradually as the opacity increases.

How will my pet react to blindness?

How a pet adapts to becoming blind depends on many factors. Obviously if the blindness has occurred suddenly it is more difficult and takes longer for the pet to adapt than if they have been gradually losing sight for months or years. The age of your pet, its temperament, general health and previous training will all affect how quickly he or she adapts. Also their ability to learn new skills and voice commands will play a role. Some animals become depressed initially. They might sleep more, have a decreased interest in toys or not want to go out for walks for example. These need gentle encouragement to begin to interact again – it is important to train rather than over protect so that they retain some independence. Some animals cope better if there is another pet in the home to act as a companion and guide. Most dogs and cats however surprise their owners by how quickly they settle and adapt to their disability.

Living with a blind pet

Your pet will have a 'mental map' of their home environment. Keep furniture, the pet's bed and food bowl in the same place. Sometimes using scent markings such as citrus essential oils to mark the edge of furniture or doorways for example helps the pet learn their way around. Similarly scents can be used on the stairs – dogs in particular find going downstairs difficult when they first become blind. A change in texture or noise will help them locate where they are – from carpet in the hall to lino in the kitchen, or onto a mat by the back door for example. Remind the children not to leave toys lying around for the pet to bump into!

In the garden, check for holes, low branches which are sticking out and other potential hazards. Remember to look from their level not ours! Fence off any ponds.

Taking dogs out for walks is important – they should still be exercised! Keeping to the same walks every day so that they become familiar with their surroundings and feel secure is important. A flexi-lead is ideal – they can still exercise but know that you are close. It is useful for them to recognise a word for 'danger' – just in case they are about to run into a tree! Teach them to recognise kerbs and steps – but remember to use precise commands when training – for example do not use the word 'down' for the kerb if they are used to lying down on this command! Some people find that it is helpful to have a bell on their wrist, or to jangle keys so that the pet knows where you are.

Play should be continued. Toys with bells or squeakers, noisy clockwork mice, catnip toys and so on are useful. As are the food games – toys with treats hidden within for them to find.

Cats can still go out if blind, but you should make sure that the garden is safe. They might need teaching how to negotiate the cat flap again so providing a litter tray is useful until they gain confidence.

Always bear in mind that it is often worse for you to watch your animal adapt to its blindness than it is for him or her to live with. Most blind pets lead happy healthy lives. If you have any specific questions regarding caring for your pet please do not hesitate to contact me.