

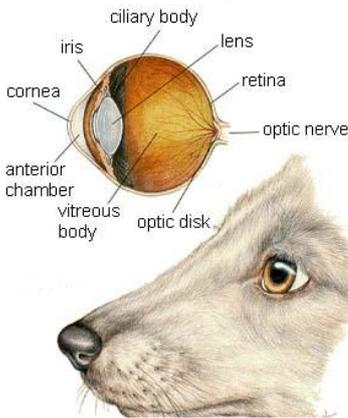
HEARING OR VISION IMPAIRMENT?

It is now a well known fact that our pets are living longer, due to improved health care and scientific advances in veterinary medicine.

As we all know only too well, as we get older, our bodies start to slow down and doesn't regenerate or heal itself in the way that it once did. Many problems can occur in the later stages of life and the body can find it more difficult to fight off infections or viruses. Other problems can be partial or full loss of vision or hearing.

LOSS OF VISION

There are a few causes for loss of sight. The three most common causes are cataracts, glaucoma and progressive retinal degeneration.



Cataracts is where the lens becomes opaque instead of clear; it can happen gradually or quickly (over the space of a few weeks) The cloudy lens restricts vision and causes blurriness and can eventually lead to total blindness in the later stages. Cataracts is most common in old age but can be related to other conditions, commonly Diabetes Mellitus.

Glaucoma is not as common as cataracts. It can be very painful if left untreated and is caused by increased fluid pressure within the eye. If caught early the pressure can be reduced by using medication; in more advanced cases the eye needs to be removed.

Progressive retinal atrophy is an inherited condition that can be found in almost all breeds. It is caused by degeneration of the retina, which eventually causes blindness. It can happen

at varying speeds depending on the individual. Often, night vision is affected first, leading to daytime blindness. There is no cure, which is why reputable breeders will not breed from animals with the condition, but unfortunately healthy parents don't guarantee the pups will not develop the problem later on in life.

CLINICAL SIGNS

If vision is lost it can quickly become apparent to you, the owner, as your pet may show disorientation or clumsiness. But, in the early stages of vision loss, some owners may not associate the symptoms. For example, glaucoma is painful so it may start with the pet rubbing the eye. It is a good idea to get any concerns with your pets sight checked as soon as possible with a vet.

HOW TO COPE WITH YOUR PET'S LOSS OF VISION

Firstly, it is important to understand that the animal may be confused, disorientated and even depressed, particularly if their vision has gone quickly. Their other senses will most likely start to heighten to keep them aware of what is around them.

- It is important to keep their routine and surroundings constant; don't move furniture around as they will use this as landmarks and keep food and water bowls in the same place.
- Keep areas safe; don't leave things around that could cause them to trip or leave doors half open as they may bang into them. Baby gates are recommended to prevent access to stairs.

- When letting blind pets outside, either use an enclosed area such as the garden or walk them on a lead. It would also be a good idea to fence off ponds or swimming pools.

- It is a good idea to use voice commands – new words can be taught to such as 'up' or 'step' to warn the dog there is a step when out walking. A good command that I used to use with my diabetic collie that suffered from advanced cataracts was 'watch out!' at which time she would stop in her tracks completely! This was taught almost before I realised and was used on a daily basis to help overcome the hurdles of the day.

- In a blind pet situation it is also worth remembering the benefits of microchipping; there is a high risk of the pet becoming lost if for some reason they escaped.

Caring for a blind pet can be hard work for both pet and owner and it is vital that these points are taken into consideration to make this problem as comfortable as possible.

LOSS OF HEARING

Most commonly cases of hearing loss are due to old age. It usually occurs gradually and the

animal retains some recognition, such as loud and high pitched sounds.

Often the first signs of hearing loss are mistaken for disobedience and include confusion, excessive barking, unresponsiveness and even aggression.

HOW TO COPE WITH YOUR PET'S LOSS OF HEARING

It is important to always let your dog know where you are and never creep up on them as they tend to feel more insecure and startled; this could lead to the development of an aggressive nature. Heavy footsteps when you enter a room allow your pet to feel vibrations and be aware of your presence.

- Do not approach your pet from behind in a hurried or rushed manner - gently touch them as you approach them.

- As with sight loss, it is best to exercise hearing impaired dogs in an enclosed area or on a lead as they will not hear you calling them. It is a good idea to start encouraging your pet to watch you by using a treat and hand signals. In darkness, a flash light can be used to get their attention. Dogs are highly tuned to body language, posture and facial expressions and if trained properly this can be a useful tool. Arm movements are a must but even smiling at your pet can show them that they have been a good boy where as shaking a finger would indicate that they have done something wrong.

A great thing to remember is that animals adapt far quicker and easier than humans to a change in their abilities – this makes our job as an owner rewarding when we get it right. Hearing or vision impairment does not mean that your pet need stop enjoying life; neither does it mean that you will stop having fun with them!

