

Does Your Dog Have Cataracts?

The term *Cataract* refers to a problem with the lens inside the eye. Cataracts can start as a small dot or microscopic blisters or white streaks to a completely white lens. The rate of progression may be slow or progress rapidly. The rate of progression is difficult to predict and differs from animal to animal. The lens inside the eye is the part that transfers light from the front of the eye to the retina located in the back of the eye. When this transmission of light is altered, such as when a cataract forms, the vision becomes blurred. With a completely white lens, the eye sees only white and dark, no images.

Cataracts are classified into different categories; congenital (meaning born with), acquired (a cataract that develops as a young animal or from a trauma to the eye), and senile (develops during the aging). It is important to determine the type of cataract your animal has as this will determine whether surgery may be performed. There is no medical treatment known to slow the progression, prevent the formation or reverse the changes of cataracts.

The first thing you should do if you suspect your pet has a cataract is to have the animal examined by a veterinary ophthalmologist. The lens of the eye is an important link of the total vision system, but the health of the entire eye should be evaluated before the lens develops a complete cataract. Early evaluation of the eye with a cataract sometimes permits examination of the retina. If the cataract is complete, the retina cannot be seen directly and may require an ultrasound or electroretinogram examination. Not all cataracts lead to blindness. Incomplete cataracts may not impair vision significantly. Getting a good evaluation of the eye will determine if your pet would benefit from cataract surgery.

Cataract surgery involves removing the lens in the eye. It is important to know that your Veterinary Ophthalmologist can now implant an artificial lens in the eye, using the same procedure as is done in humans. This new lens will allow your pet to see much better following the surgery. You should ask your animal eye care specialist if this can be done for your pet. If the answer is no, is it because of a particular problem your pet has, or is it because this doctor does not have experience with the procedure.

This type of surgery does require a lot of post surgery care on your part. Your pet will require confinement to a crate for a period of time, eye drops given several times daily and they must wear an "E" collar to prevent them from scratching or rubbing their eye(s). If you are unable to provide this after surgery care and treatment, surgery for your pet may not be recommended. Also if your pet will not or cannot be treated as required it may not be a good surgical candidate. Animals that bite or are difficult to handle (giving repeated doses of eye drops and examinations), are generally not a good candidate for this type of surgery.

In conclusion, if you suspect your pet has a vision problem, see your veterinary ophthalmologist early. Your regular veterinarian should be able to refer you to the specialist in your area. With some diligence on your part, your pet can live a normal life following treatment for cataracts.

Information for this article was obtained from Dr Paul Jackson DVM and from the website of Michael Zigler DVM.