

Medical

Pet Talk: Eye Conditions, Cataracts, Allergies, Heart Murmurs in Dogs,

Cataracts Could Affect Your Pet's Vision

If you've noticed your pet's eye lens becoming cloudy or opaque, your pet could be developing cataracts. Though cataracts can decrease vision, or even cause complete blindness, not every companion animal that develops cataracts requires surgery. Dr. Lucien Vallone, clinical assistant professor at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, explained how cataracts can affect pets.

"Cataract is an opacity of the lens," Vallone said. "A clear lens is necessary for good vision; thus, any opacification can cause decreased vision. However, not all cataracts are the same. Some cases of cataracts are so severe they can cause blindness and inflammation in the eye, which may cause significant discomfort. Some cases are small enough they don't interfere with vision at all and should be monitored."

All companion animals can develop cataracts, but Vallone said cataracts are common in dogs. Several breeds of dogs may be predisposed to cataracts, though not every dog within these breeds is affected.

"Veterinarians encourage dog breeders to participate in breed-soundness examinations," Vallone said. "These examinations screen dogs for any evidence of heritable disease. Specifically, veterinary ophthalmologists will usually recommend prospective pet owners to ask dog breeders if their dogs have undergone yearly Eye Certification Registry (ECR) examinations. These examinations are performed by board-certified ophthalmologists and help breeders to eliminate cataracts that are potentially inherited."

Vallone added that cataracts in companion animals, "especially dogs," could be a sign of another health concern, such as diabetes mellitus.

"In addition to cloudiness of the eyes, diabetic animals often display fluctuations in appetite, weight, thirst, and urination," Vallone said.

Currently, cataract surgery is the only treatment for companion animals to restore clarity to the lens. Vallone said the procedure is similar to cataract surgery in humans but requires general anesthesia. Topical therapies often can prevent the common and painful complications of cataracts but cannot restore vision.

If you think your pet may be developing cataracts, consult your veterinarian. All animals with any form of cataracts should be evaluated by a veterinarian or veterinary ophthalmologist to help preserve vision and health.

Heart Murmurs in Dogs

When a veterinarian uses a stethoscope to listen to your dog's heart, chances are that the heart will sound normal. However, in some cases, a veterinarian may hear an abnormality such as a heart murmur.

Sonya Wesselowski, a clinical assis-

tant professor of cardiology at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, said heart murmurs are abnormal heart sounds caused by turbulent or rapid blood flow within the heart. In dogs, heart murmurs are usually the result of a leaky or narrowed heart valve.

Heart murmurs are not always a cause for concern. Wesselowski said that some soft heart murmurs could be normal in growing puppies less than 6 months of age. However, most heart murmurs in dogs do indicate that there is an underlying abnormality of the heart. In some cases, the heart murmur could be caused by a congenital heart defect the dog was born with, or due to a heart disease that develops later in life.

How can you know if your dog has a heart murmur? Wesselowski said that regular examinations with your veterinarian are crucial for detection of heart m u r m u r s ,

as a heart murmur itself does not cause any signs or symptoms. Instead, a heart murmur is a finding that suggests a cardiac problem may be present.

If a heart murmur is detected in your dog, Wesselowski recommended additional testing to investigate for an underlying heart condition.

"Cardiac ultrasound, also known as an echocardiogram, is the definitive test to determine the cause of your dog's heart murmur and diagnose any underlying heart disease," Wesselowski said. "Your veterinarian may also choose to perform an X-ray of your dog's chest as an initial screening test to look for evidence of heart enlargement."

Even if a dog is not showing signs of heart disease such as lethargy, exercise intolerance, cough, difficulty breathing, or fainting spells, further investigation into the cause of a heart murmur is always a good idea, Wesselowski said. These tests can help to determine if your dog would benefit from starting cardiac medications or if they should have more frequent checkups to monitor their heart condition.

In general, most heart murmurs are an indication of an underlying heart condition and should be taken seriously. If your veterinarian detects a heart murmur in your dog, be sure to investigate the murmur and determine the best way to protect your dog's heart health.

Pets Can Have Allergies, Too

With spring right around the corner, many of us are bracing ourselves for pesky allergies. Just like people, pets can suffer from allergies, too. While humans cough and sneeze their way through allergy season, pets usually deal with allergies differently.

Dr. Adam Patterson, a clinical associate professor and chief of dermatology at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, said every animal has a different reaction to allergies, just as people respond to allergies differently. However, most animals display itch as a hallmark sign of allergic skin disease.

"An itch may be manifested as licking, chewing, biting, rubbing, scratching, head shaking, and/or scooting," Patterson said. "Common itchy body areas include the face, ears, paws, armpits, groin, rump, and anal region. Horses may present with an itchy skin disease and/or hives."

Allergens that most commonly irritate pets include fleas, pollen, molds, mites, insects, danders, and food.

"Every pet has its own itch tolerance, which means the intensity and reason(s) for your pet's itch may not be the same as another animal," Patterson said. "Regardless of the animal, allergic patients are prone to bacterial and yeast infections that can cause skin discoloration, hair loss, pimples, scabs, and/or ear disease."

If your pet shows any sign of an allergy, it is best to contact your veteri-



narian so they can properly diagnose the cause of itch. Your veterinarian can also perform tests to determine the most effective treatment plan to alleviate your pet's discomfort.

We all know how annoying allergies can be, so be sure to keep an eye on your pet this allergy season. If your pet shows any sign of an allergic skin disease, visit your veterinarian to help alleviate your pet's discomfort.

Watch Out For Canine Eye Conditions

Vision may not be a dog's strongest sense, but it still plays an important role in daily life. A dog's eye health can deteriorate because of aging or disease, so dog owners should be aware of the various eye issues that can occur.

Dr. Lucien Vallone, a clinical assistant professor at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, specializes in ophthalmology and regularly treats eye conditions in dogs.

Vallone said there are three main categories of canine eye problems: diseases of the ocular surface, diseases that cause inflammation within the eye, and glaucoma.

Diseases of the eye's surface impact the conjunctiva—the mucous membrane over the eye—and the cornea—the clear, protective outer layer of the eye. Vallone said these diseases include inflammation of the cornea, dry eye, and eyelid abnormalities.

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The second category is diseases that cause inflammation within the eye, collectively called uveitis.

"Uveitis is often linked to diseases that affect the dog's body systemically, like certain tumors or infections," Vallone said.

Lastly, glaucoma occurs when there is increased pressure inside the eye, resulting in loss of vision. He said this is one of the most common causes of pain and blindness in dogs.

A dog experiencing any of these eye conditions will usually have red, squinty eyes that leak discharge. If the dog has reduced vision, it may also have altered behavior, such as a reluctance to climb stairs or go outside.

"These signs might occur more frequently at nighttime, rather than daytime," Vallone said. "These subtleties may help a veterinarian discern one cause of vision loss from another."

If a dog is diagnosed with any of these eye conditions, its veterinarian may recommend medical, surgical, or even supplemental therapies. Common supplements are believed to provide beneficial antioxidant effects to the lens and retina within the eye.

"These effects may help to delay or prevent several progressive and degenerative diseases of the eye," Vallone said, though he added that more research is needed before these effects can be proven.

He said many causes of eye discomfort or vision impairment are correctable, especially if treated early. If you suspect your dog has any eye conditions or if you notice any indications of vision loss, see a veterinarian for a diagnosis.

Fortunately, if a dog does become blind, either from aging or an eye condition, it is not as serious as some may believe. Dogs are excellent at using their noses and ears to navigate and are great at re-learning how to do things after losing their sight.

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Pet Talk is a service of the College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, Texas A&M University. Stories can be found at vetmed.tamu.edu/pet-talk. Suggestions for future topics may be directed to editor@cvm.tamu.edu