

What You Need to Know About Cataracts in Pets

By Dr. Karen Shaw-Becker

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker. Both dogs and cats can develop cataracts, but they're much more common in dogs. Cataracts in pets can progress very slowly over many years or they can come on very quickly, leading to blindness within a few days or weeks.

Types of Cataracts

An incipient cataract means that the clouding of the lens is still minor and may not interfere with your pet's vision. An immature cataract means that there's a greater portion of the lens that is clouded and probably some blurred vision. Cataracts are considered mature when the entire lens is clouded and most or all of the vision in your pet is lost.

There's also a condition called hypermature cataracts. These develop over months or years and cause the lens capsule to wrinkle and the lens inside to shrivel up. Some hypermature cataracts are completely cloudy. Others still have clear areas that allow some vision for your pet if the rest of the eye is still functional.

Even with really progressive cataracts, your pet may still, on occasion, be able to see some things. But as the cataracts progress, the pupil, which is usually the black dot in the center of your pet's eye, can go from black to bluish, and even then, to white.

Cataracts in Cats

Thankfully, cataracts are actually very rare in kitties and are usually caused by an eye infection or injury. Uveitis is a common inflammatory eye condition that is oftentimes suspected as an underlying cause of cataract formation in cats. Uveitis is a painful condition that causes kitties to squint, have very watery eyes and could be very, very sensitive to light, and even [have] spasms of the eyelids.

Chronic uveitis is often secondary to significant infectious diseases like feline leukemia virus, or FeLV; feline immunodeficiency virus, or FIV; feline infectious peritonitis, or FIP; as well as toxoplasmosis. Feline cataracts that are hereditary are extremely rare, thankfully. Cats can develop diabetic cataracts but this, too, is also quite uncommon. Now, unfortunately, cataracts in dogs are much more common and more clinically significant than [in] cats.

Risk Factors and Causes of Cataracts in Dogs

Many dogs are genetically predisposed to cataracts, and they can develop at any age. The condition is more prevalent in certain breeds, including the Cocker Spaniel, Poodle, Siberian husky, Schnauzer, Old English sheepdog, Samoyed, golden and Labrador retrievers, Maltese, Boston terrier and the Yorkshire terrier.

Diabetes is a primary cause of cataracts in dogs. Certainly, in my experience, the majority of cataracts I see in practice are because of diabetes. Estimates are that 75% of diabetic dogs will

develop blindness from cataracts within a year of diagnosis, which is why I recommend proactively beginning eye support the minute your dog is diagnosed with diabetes.

Diabetic cataracts can occur very quickly, in fact, sometimes literally overnight. Your dog goes to bed with normal-looking eyes and can wake up in the morning with white pupils, which can be a little overwhelming for owners.

If this sudden change occurs in your pet's eyes, you should get him or her to the veterinarian right away for a diabetic workup. If the diabetes is well-controlled and the inflammation associated with the cataract is also controlled, then these dogs can be good candidates for cataract surgery, which I'll discuss in a minute.

Cataracts can also be secondary in dogs to another underlying eye condition such as progressive retinal atrophy, uveitis or glaucoma. If your dog is diagnosed with cataracts, it's important that your vet makes sure there's not another underlying eye disorder as well.

Something like trauma to a dog's eye can absolutely cause the lens capsule to rupture. In a rupture, the contents of the lens leak out. This can lead to a severe form of uveitis, which can then lead to secondary cataracts. If your dog suffers from any type of eye injury, it's important that you go to the veterinarian as soon as possible.

Sometimes you can't tell right away if there's damage to the lens capsule. And by the time it's noticeable, it can actually be too late to save your pet's vision, so just be sure and go to the veterinarian if your pet has any eye trauma.

Puppies fed a nutritionally unbalanced milk replacement can also develop cataracts due to nutritional deficiencies. Fortunately, this type of cataract oftentimes improves as the puppies grow older.

Older dogs can absolutely develop age-related cataracts secondary to the aging process, but these are usually very small and actually very slow to develop. They don't usually cause serious vision problems. Again, the minute you see changes in your senior dog's eyes, begin a proactive, preventive protocol to slow down how quickly all those changes will move forward.

Treatment Options for Cataracts

If you suspect your pet has a cataract because you see something cloudy in the eye or if you can clearly see that she's having vision problems, I recommend a visit to your veterinarian, or even better, an appointment with a veterinary ophthalmologist for a complete eye examination.

If the diagnosis is cataracts, less troublesome ones will be rechecked periodically to see if they're progressing. Sometimes anti-inflammatory eye drops are prescribed, and this is when I also prescribe antioxidants that can specifically cross the blood-brain barrier to support remaining ocular function and health.

If your pet's vision is affected, her quality of life will obviously become compromised. If the cataracts are progressing rapidly, surgery is sometimes recommended to restore vision. If a veterinary ophthalmologist recommends cataract surgery for your pet, the outcome will be better if you do it sooner rather than later, preferably before the cataract matures.

Mature cataracts are much more difficult to manage during surgery than less advanced cataracts. Surgery to remove cataracts is done under general anesthesia. A very small incision is made in the eye. The procedure, called phacoemulsification, which is the exact same technique used in human cataract surgery, is performed. It breaks down the cataract and then removes the cloudy lens.

Once the lens is removed from the lens capsule, most pets then receive a replacement implant. The implant is permanent, just like in people, and can restore almost normal vision to your pet in some cases. Completely normal vision is also sometimes achieved.

Successful cataract surgery results in an immediate and profound cure for pets who've been suffering from decreased vision. Those of you who have been through it – As a veterinarian, it's those moments when you cry, because animals, they're stumbling around and they're confused, and they wake up from anesthesia and it's a brand new world. It can be incredibly expensive, but incredibly rewarding at the same time to have your pet's vision restored.

However, sometimes the lens capsule is loose-fitting or can't be fragmented completely by emulsification. When this happens, the lens and lens capsule are removed. In this situation, obviously there's no way to do a lens replacement. Pets with this issue can still see after their surgery, they just won't have perfect vision compared to those animals that have lens replacement.

Patients that have the whole lens removed also end up being farsighted, which means objects close to them will be blurry. Now, [there's] nothing to worry about. These pets actually adjust beautifully and usually end up with pretty good functional vision over time.

Prevention and Recommendations

There are some things you can do to help reduce or prevent cataract formation in your pet. One of the most important being [is to] keep your pet at a normal weight and feed a species-appropriate diet so she doesn't develop diabetes. Kind of common sense, but oftentimes you don't think about it until it's already happened.

Cataracts are inevitable in unregulated diabetic dogs. They are fast-acting. They will render your dog blind within a short period of time. Surgery is your only option to restore vision to your pet, and the success of the surgery is oftentimes dependent on how well your dog is managed in terms of diabetes.

A far simpler and a far more commonsense approach, and certainly much kinder and less expensive, is to keep your dog in excellent physical condition. Feed a biologically appropriate diet, which means a low-glycemic, grain-free, carbohydrate-free, low-starch diet. Maintain your

pet at a healthy weight. Avoid lifestyle-induced form of these cataracts coming into play by just avoiding the metabolic dysregulation in the first place. Common sense, but oftentimes also overlooked.

I highly recommend that you don't allow your pets to be over-vaccinated. We're not talking anti-[vaxx]. We're not anti-vaxxers. But annual vaccines are unnecessary in most situations, and many of the medications that veterinarians are routinely prescribing are also unnecessary. So, keeping all those chemicals going into your pets at a bare minimum is just a commonsense, wise idea as well.

We know that some cataract formation can develop because of drug-related systemic toxicosis in dogs, so keeping unnecessary chemicals to a minimum is a good idea. If you have a dog over 7 years of age, I also recommend common sense. When dogs get to midlife between 5 and 7 [years old], adding in some antioxidants and herbs that can specifically help guard against cataract formation is also wise, especially if you have a breed that is one of those high-risk categories.

It's important to provide your pet with a diet that's rich in antioxidants. Everyone here who is a regular viewer at Mercola Healthy Pets knows that I'm a huge believer in food being the best source of antioxidants. That means serving your pet a nutritionally balanced, fresh food diet. Antioxidants scavenge free radicals and can actually slow down the degenerative changes in your pet's eyes. Specifically, vitamins C and E are amazing antioxidants for the eyes that are thought to slow down the development and progression of cataracts.

An excellent supplement you can add to your pet's food in pill or raw food form is also bilberries. Bilberries can make great training treats as well if your dogs will eat them. Bilberries are great sources of flavonoids and actually have really high antioxidant properties. Taken with vitamin E, they are known to be protective to the eye tissue in humans, and have proven to halt lens clouding in nearly all the people with early stage cataracts. I've seen this to be true in pets as well, if you catch them early enough.

You can also talk with your holistic veterinarian about supplementing your dog's diet with beta-carotene or astaxanthin. I love astaxanthin for the eyes because it crosses the blood-brain barrier and really does an awesome job of scavenging free radicals within your pet's eyes, which is where it needs to happen.

Dogs also benefit from a supplement of glutathione, as well as alpha-lipoic acid, which are antioxidants that have been shown to dramatically reduce the risk of developing cataracts and other eye disorders. There are also nutraceutical eye drops and Chinese herbs that have been shown to have some good success in reducing how quickly lens degeneration occurs in pets. Those products can be prescribed by your holistic veterinarian based on your pet's specific eye changes.

Now, most importantly, if you see changes occurring in your pet's eyes, you need to have your dog's or cat's eyes evaluated by your veterinarian to make sure you're doing all you can to prevent further degeneration, and to slow down or even stop the progression of an existing condition like cataracts.