

Is Your Dog's TV Habit Hiding a Problem?

Could your pet's love for the screen be a sign of something more? Learn how this curious behavior might reveal important health clues.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Some dogs appear to enjoy watching TV, while others don't seem the least bit interested in screens
- A team of veterinary researchers recently published a study of dogs' screen viewing habits worldwide, and uncovered several compelling insights
- The ultimate goal of the researchers is to develop a method veterinarians can use to assess dogs' eyesight, especially as they age

Does your canine BFF watch TV? Some dogs absolutely do, as a quick cruise through social media videos demonstrates:

Can Interest in Screens Help Assess Eyesight in Canines?

Recently, researchers at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine became curious as well about canine TV viewing preferences, but for their own reasons. According to study co-author and veterinary ophthalmologist and surgical sciences professor Freya Mowat, the purpose of the research was to "determine factors that influence a dogs' [sic] interest in interacting with video content and to see if age or vision were related to this behavior."¹

The research team's ultimate goal is to improve veterinarians' ability to evaluate vision in dogs — an assessment that has been sorely lacking in veterinary medicine.

*"The method we currently use to assess vision in dogs is a very low bar. In humans it would be equivalent to saying yes or no if a person was blind," says Mowat. "We need more sensitive ways to assess vision in dogs, using a dog eye chart equivalent. We speculate that videos have the potential for sustaining a dog's attention long enough to assess visual function, but we didn't know what type of content is most engaging and appealing to dogs."*²

The study results, published in the journal Applied Animal Behaviour Science,³ report that as it turns out, dogs are most interested in videos featuring other animals, especially other dogs.

Dog Parents Around the Globe Participated in the Study

The UW veterinary researchers developed an internet questionnaire for dog parents about the TV-watching habits of their pets and made it available to people around the globe.

Questionnaire participants answered questions about the types of screens in their home, how their dogs interacted with screens, the kinds of content their dogs interacted with the most, and information about their dog's age, sex, breed, and where they live.

In addition, participants were asked to describe the behaviors their dogs engaged in while watching screen-based content. Did they run, jump, and track, for example, or did they lie down or sit down? Did they vocalize (barking, whining, growling)?

Dog owners were also given the option to show their dog four short videos that featured a panther, a dog, a bird and traffic moving along a road. They were then asked to rate their dog's interest in each video and how closely the dog tracked the moving objects on the screen.

Fascinating Findings

The researchers received 1,600 responses from dog owners in the U.S., Canada, United Kingdom, European Union and Australasia. Of those, 1,246 respondents ultimately completed the study. Some of the more interesting findings:

- Age and vision were a factor in how much a dog interacted with a screen
- Sporting and herding breeds appeared more interested in all content than other breeds
- Content featuring animals was the most popular, with other dogs being by far the biggest hit
- Content featuring humans wasn't particularly interesting
- Cartoons were preferred by over 10% of dogs
- Movement on screen was a strong attention-grabber

Aging-Related Vision Changes in Dogs

Mowat plans to build on these study results "by focusing future research on the development and optimization of video-based methods that can not only assess changes in visual attention as dogs age, but also answer questions that could help our four-legged friends age as gracefully as possible."

"We know that poor vision negatively impacts quality of life in older people, but the effect of aging and vision changes in dogs is largely unknown because we can't accurately assess it," Mowat says. "Like people, dogs are living longer and we want to make sure we support a healthier life for them as well."

Mowat also wants to study how a dog's vision ages compared with the human or humans they share a home with.

"Dogs have a much shorter lifespan than their owner, of course, and if there are emerging environmental or lifestyle factors that influence visual aging, it might well show up in our dogs decades before it shows up in us," she explains. "Our dogs could be our sentinels — the canine in the proverbial coal mine."

Sources and References

^{1,2} [University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine News Release, January 17, 2024](#)

³ [Donohue, L.K. et al. Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Volume 270, January 2024](#)