

What May Be Behind Your Pet's Unsightly Tear Stains

Many pet parents fret over tear staining because of its appearance, yet there could be a more concerning reason behind those rust-colored stains. Before you decide they're 'normal,' rule out these medical conditions that may cause excess tearing.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Epiphora, or excessive tear production, is the most common cause of tear stains in dogs and cats
- Many factors can cause excessive tearing in pets, including structural abnormalities, eyelid or eyelash problems, injury or facial hair irritating the eyes
- Tear stains may also be the result of abnormal tear drainage, which is quite common in brachycephalic breeds (dogs and cats with “pushed in” faces)
- If an unpleasant odor is present, your pet may have developed a yeast infection (this is especially true if the stains are more brownish than reddish)
- At a foundational level, you'll also want to feed your pet a fresh, balanced and species-appropriate diet and fresh, filtered drinking water

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published October 21, 2016.

Tear staining refers to reddish brown streaks that appear under your dog or cat's eyes. It's most common in dog breeds like the Maltese, Lhasa Apso and Shih Tzu, and will be much more noticeable on animals with light-colored fur.

Many owners fret over tear staining because they believe it to be unsightly, but it could be more than a purely aesthetic concern. Epiphora, or excessive tear production, is the most common cause of the discoloration.

This is because your pet's tears contain porphyrins, which are molecules containing iron as the result of breakdown of red blood cells.

The amount of porphyrins your pet makes and secretes can be influenced by genetics, environmental factors and overall health status. If the porphyrins sit on your pet's fur, they can leave a rust-colored stain.

Some natural options for removing tear stains are discussed below, but first it's important to rule out certain medical issues that could be causing your pet's excessive tear production.

Medical Reasons for Excess Tearing and Tear Stains

There are many conditions that may result in excess tearing. If your dog has protruding eyes and a flatter snout, check to be sure facial hair is not rubbing on her cornea, leading to irritation and tearing.

Keeping fur trimmed short around her eyes will solve this problem. Other medical conditions that may cause excess tearing include:

- **Entropion** — A condition in which the lower eyelid folds inward, resulting in pain, irritation and excessive tearing
- **Trichiasis** — A condition in which eyelashes grow in the wrong direction, causing pain and irritation
- **Ectropion** — A condition in which the lower eyelid droops or rolls out from the surface of the eye, causing irritation and watery eyes

If structural abnormality of your pet's eyelid or eyelashes isn't to blame, chronic eye irritation leading to excessive tearing could be due to viral conjunctivitis (which is especially common in cats), glaucoma or an allergic reaction.

Acute injury, such as if a foreign object gets stuck in your pet's eye, can also cause eye irritation and tearing.

Some Breeds Struggle with Normal Tear Drainage

Tear stains may also be the result of abnormal tear drainage, which is quite common in brachycephalic breeds (dogs and cats with "pushed in" faces). Examples include boxers, bulldogs, Pekingese, pugs, Shih Tzus, Himalayan (cat) and Persians (cat).

Eyelid problems are common with these breeds and due to their protruding eyes, they may have difficulty closing their eyes all the way. This can lead to drying and irritation, leading to excessive tearing as the body attempts to keep the corneas moist and well lubricated. Some of these breeds also have abnormal tear drainage.

Instead of their tears being funneled into their tear ducts, they may instead spill out onto their faces, which means their eyes may be chronically runny. In some cases, your pet's tear ducts may simply be blocked, and your veterinarian may be able to flush them out and solve the problem.

Some dogs have tear ducts that have been sealed shut since birth (this is sometimes seen in Cocker Spaniels and poodles, for instance). Others, as mentioned, may struggle with normal tear draining because of their flat face and shallow eye sockets.¹

If your pet has a tear drainage problem that can be resolved with surgery, such as prolapsed third eyelid, make sure the procedure is done correctly (the gland is replaced verses being removed).

Consulting with a **veterinary ophthalmologist** for complicated cases is well worth it. These vet specialists will have the training, experience and specialized equipment necessary to perform delicate eye surgery.

Excessive Tearing Can Lead to Infection

Constant watery discharge from your pet's eyes is likely uncomfortable for your pet and, due to the area staying constantly wet, may lead to infection. If an unpleasant odor is present, your pet may have developed a yeast infection (this is especially true if the stains are more brownish than reddish).

If yeast or another infection is present, see a holistic veterinarian for natural treatment options. You can try colloidal silver, for instance, by applying a small amount (via a cotton ball) to your pet's face. Colloidal silver has antimicrobial properties that may help reduce yeast infection or dermatitis in the area.

You can also use a diluted organic tear-free baby shampoo to gently cleanse the skin around your dog's eyes twice a day until the infection resolves.

Tips for Removing and Preventing Tear Stains

Some dogs are more prone to tear stains than other, even within the same breed. One of the simplest methods of prevention, however, applies to all dogs: wipe her face with a warm, damp cloth at least twice a day, which will help to clear away porphyrin-containing moisture. Keeping her face hair trimmed is also important.

If the hair around your pet's eyes is notably annoying to her, ask a groomer to shave the hair under the eyes and then apply a thin layer of coconut oil to the area. This may help to reduce irritation and inflammation.

There are some herbal eye wash products available that may be useful for pets prone to tear stains. Supplements that assist in detoxification, including milk thistle, SAMe, dandelion, olive leaf, chlorophyll, colostrum and **probiotics**, can be effective in decreasing the amount of tear staining.

At a foundational level, you'll also want to feed your pet a fresh, balanced and species-appropriate diet and fresh, filtered drinking water. This will ensure she's not taking in excess iron or impurities that will further stress her body (and perhaps contribute to staining).

If you feed a commercial diet, rotate brands and flavors/recipes to provide a variety of nutrients to your pet but to also to give him a break from the exact same amount of premixed vitamins and minerals you feed on a daily basis. Many pet foods meet AAFCO minimum nutrient requirements but can also contain borderline toxic levels of some nutrients (such as iron) and over time feeding a diet too high or low in nutrients is stressful on the body.

By keeping your pet's face clean, providing her with a healthy diet and addressing any injuries or structural or infectious factors in her excessive tearing, you can likely keep tear staining to a minimum. Whatever you do, do not attempt to remove tear stains with products like milk of magnesia, medicated powders intended for humans, makeup remover, corn syrup or hydrogen peroxide.

Also, avoid tearstain-removal products that contain antibiotics, which may or may not be listed on the label. Any product you use for tear stains should be clearly labeled "antibiotic-free." If you're interested in a natural tearstain remover, your holistic veterinarian should be able to recommend one.

Sources and References

¹ [Capital Gazette August 2, 2016 \(Archived\)](#)
