

Cataracts in Dogs – What Every Pet Parent Should Know

Here is what you need to know about cataracts in dogs — what they are, what causes them, and what you can do at home to support your furry friend.

Reviewed by Dr. Tracy Duffner

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cataracts form when proteins get damaged and clump inside the lens, clouding your dog's vision. They can start small but may eventually block light entirely, leading to partial or complete blindness
- Genetic predisposition is the leading cause of cataracts in dogs, with breeds like Cocker Spaniels, Poodles, and Labradors most at risk. Diabetes is a close second followed by aging, trauma, and inflammation as other common contributing factors
- Symptoms include cloudy or milky eyes, bumping into objects, difficulty with stairs, poor night vision, squinting, or eye redness. Complications like glaucoma or uveitis may cause pain and distress
- Surgery is the only proven treatment to remove cataracts, with reported long term success rates of 85% to 90% in uncomplicated cases. Eye drops and supplements may help manage inflammation and support eye health but cannot cure cataracts
- At home, you can help by maintaining a safe environment, following your veterinarian's care plan, using voice cues, and protecting your dog's eyes from injury and excessive UV light

When you look into your dog's eyes, you hope to see a clear, bright sparkle looking back at you. But sometimes, that sparkle is dimmed by a cloudy or milky appearance. If you have noticed this in your pup's eyes, you might be seeing the early signs of cataracts.

Cataracts are one of the most common eye problems in dogs, and while they can be concerning, the good news is that with proper care and treatment, many dogs continue to live happy, comfortable lives — and in some cases, even regain clear vision.

Understanding Cataracts — The Basics

Think of the eye as a camera. It has a lens that focuses light onto the retina, which acts like the film, capturing images and sending them to the brain. In a healthy eye, this lens is clear and transparent, allowing light to pass through easily. However, when protein fibers inside the lens abnormally clump together, a cataract develops. This turns what should be a clear window into something cloudy.¹

This cloudiness blocks light from reaching the retina. At first, the changes may be small and may not affect vision much. But as the cataract grows, it interferes more and more with sight, sometimes even leading to blindness if left untreated.²

Cataracts are not rare — in fact, they can happen in dogs of any age, breed, or gender. However, certain breeds are more prone due to genetics. Other health conditions, such as diabetes, can also play a big role.

What Do Cataracts Look Like?

The most noticeable sign of a cataract is a cloudy, gray, or milky-white appearance in the center of your dog's eye. Depending on how advanced the cataract is, this cloudiness can range from a faint haze to a thick, opaque film that completely blocks light.

It is important to know that not all hazy eyes mean cataracts. Many middle-aged and senior dogs develop a normal age-related change called lenticular sclerosis. This gives the eye a bluish-gray tint but does not affect vision the way cataracts do. Only a veterinarian can tell the difference through a proper eye exam.³

Signs Your Dog May Have Cataracts

Cataracts themselves are not painful, but they affect vision and can lead to complications that are uncomfortable and painful. Aside from the telltale cloudy film on the eye, here are other behavioral signs you might notice:

- Bumping into furniture or walls
- Hesitation going up or down stairs
- Trouble seeing in dim light or at night
- Squinting or pawing at the eyes
- Redness in or around the eye
- Rubbing the face or head along furniture or the floor
- Becoming more anxious, clingy, or hesitant because of vision problems

If cataracts lead to complications such as uveitis (inflammation inside the eye) or glaucoma (a painful buildup of pressure in the eye), your dog may also show signs of pain like squinting, crying, or avoiding being touched near the eyes.⁴

How Do Cataracts Develop?

Cataracts do not appear overnight. They progress in stages; understanding these stages will help you and your veterinarian decide the best time for treatment.⁵

1. **Incipient cataracts** — These are tiny and affect less than 15% of the lens. They are often hard to spot without special equipment and do not usually affect vision.
2. **Immature cataracts** — At this stage, cataracts cover more of the lens (15% to 99%). Vision becomes blurry, but your dog may still see shapes and movement. Veterinarians qualify this further by characterizing the cataract as "early immature" (less than 50% of the lens affected) or "late immature" (greater than 50% of the lens affected).
3. **Mature cataracts** — The cataract now covers the entire lens. Your dog may only be able to sense light and dark, leading to severe vision loss or blindness.

4. **Hyperature cataracts** — The lens starts to shrink, and the outer capsule can wrinkle. This stage often causes inflammation (lens-induced uveitis) and increases the risk of glaucoma.

What Causes Cataracts in Dogs?

Cataracts do not just have a single cause. In fact, there are several different factors that can lead to their development, and sometimes more than one plays a role at the same time. Understanding the causes behind cataracts can help you better manage your dog's risk and catch changes early.⁶

1. **Genetics and inherited conditions** — The number one cause of cataracts in dogs is genetic predisposition. Just like people inherit certain traits — eye color, height, or even the likelihood of developing certain health problems — dogs can inherit a tendency to form cataracts. Some cataracts are present at birth (congenital), while others do not appear until a dog is a few years old. Breeds that are known to be at higher risk of cataracts include:

- Cocker Spaniels
- Labrador Retrievers
- Miniature and Toy Poodles
- Boston Terriers
- French Bulldogs
- Siberian Huskies
- Yorkshire Terriers
- Miniature Schnauzers
- American Staffordshire Terriers
- Welsh Springer Spaniels

2. **Diabetes mellitus** — This is the second most common cause of cataracts in dogs. In diabetic dogs, high blood sugar changes the chemistry inside the lens of the eye. Excess sugar attracts water into the lens, causing swelling, cloudiness, and eventually the formation of cataracts.

One unique feature of diabetic cataracts is how quickly they can develop. In some diabetic dogs, a cataract can seem to appear almost overnight. Studies show that up to 75% of diabetic dogs will develop cataracts within a year of their diagnosis. That is why strict blood sugar control and regular eye exams are so important if your dog has diabetes.

3. **Aging** — As dogs get older, their risk for cataracts increases. Age-related cataracts usually appear in senior dogs, often around 8 years of age or older. They tend to progress slowly, but they can still affect vision over time.
4. **Eye trauma and inflammation** — An injury to the eye can damage the lens or lens capsule, triggering the formation of a cataract. This can happen if the eye is scratched, punctured, or exposed to blunt trauma. Sometimes cataracts from trauma only affect one eye, unlike hereditary or diabetic cataracts which usually affect both.

Inflammation inside the eye (uveitis) can also damage the lens and cause cataracts to form. Uveitis may be

caused by infections, autoimmune conditions, or even cancer. Dogs with chronic or untreated eye inflammation are at higher risk.

5. **Nutritional deficiencies and metabolic disorders** — Though rare today, especially in adult dogs, poor nutrition in very young puppies can interfere with lens development and lead to cataracts. This was once seen more commonly in orphaned puppies fed unbalanced diets but is less common now thanks to commercial puppy formulas and complete, balanced diets.

Certain metabolic problems, such as hypocalcemia (low calcium levels), can affect the way the body regulates minerals and proteins in the lens. Though uncommon, this condition can contribute to cataract formation.

6. **Environmental factors** — While less common, outside influences can also play a role in cataract development, such as excess UV light (long-term sun exposure without eye protection), radiation (rare, but possible if a dog undergoes radiation therapy) and exposure to toxins (chemicals or certain medications that affect the eyes).

Protecting your dog from unnecessary risks, such as harsh chemicals or unsafe play environments, can help minimize these factors.

How Veterinarians Diagnose Cataracts

The best way to protect your dog is through regular veterinary checkups — early screening is helpful if your dog is a high-risk breed. Careful management of diabetes or other chronic illnesses is also important, as well as protecting your dog's eyes from trauma and unnecessary exposure.

If you suspect cataracts, the first step is a veterinary exam. Your veterinarian will look at your pet's eyes with an ophthalmoscope to check for lens cloudiness and test how your dog responds to light and movement. If cataracts are confirmed, your veterinarian may refer you to a veterinary ophthalmologist — a specialist who can evaluate the structures within the eye more closely and recommend the best treatment options.

Will Cataracts Make My Dog Blind?

Not always. Early or small cataracts may not affect vision much at all. However, as they progress, vision problems usually become more noticeable. If left untreated, mature or hypermature cataracts can cause blindness and painful complications.

It is also important to remember that blindness is not the end of the world for dogs. Many dogs adjust surprisingly well to losing their sight, especially if their environment remains familiar and safe.

Treatment Options for Cataracts

The only reliable way to remove a cataract is through surgery, usually performed by a veterinary ophthalmologist. Reported long-term success rates range from 85% to 90% in uncomplicated cases.⁷ The most common technique is called phacoemulsification, the same method used in people. During this procedure, the cloudy lens is broken up with ultrasonic waves and removed. In most cases, it is replaced with an artificial lens to restore clear vision.

Success rates for cataract removal are high, with about 90% to 95% of dogs regaining useful vision after surgery. Most dogs recover quickly and return to normal activities within days.⁸

While there are no proven eye drops that will dissolve or cure cataracts, your veterinarian may prescribe anti-inflammatory drops to control swelling and discomfort, as well as eye drops to prevent complications like uveitis or glaucoma. These do not fix the cataract but can keep the eye comfortable while you and your veterinarian decide on next steps.

Some supplements, such as antioxidant blends and Traditional Chinese Medicine formulas, may help slow the progression of cataracts or support general eye health. While they cannot reverse cataracts, they may be useful in dogs with slowly developing changes. Always check with your integrative veterinarian before starting supplements.

At-Home Management for Dogs with Cataracts

If your dog has cataracts but is not a candidate for surgery — or if you are waiting to decide — there are several ways you can help at home:

- **Stick to your veterinarian's treatment plan** — Give any prescribed eye drops exactly as directed. Talk to your integrative veterinarian about options such as acupuncture, herbal formulas, food therapy, and homeopathy to help support eye health.
- **Keep your dog's environment safe** — Avoid rearranging furniture, use non-slip rugs, and block off stairs if vision is severely impaired.
- **Use your voice** — Talk to your dog when approaching, and use verbal cues to guide them.
- **Offer comfort** — A cozy bed and a predictable routine help your dog feel secure.
- **Protect their eyes** — Dog-safe goggles may help prevent UV damage in sunny environments.

Protecting Your Dog's Sight and Quality of Life

Cataracts in dogs can be worrying, but they do not have to mean the end of your dog's happy, active life. With early detection, careful veterinary monitoring, and treatment when needed, many dogs continue to see clearly and live comfortably for years. Even in cases where vision loss occurs, dogs are incredibly adaptable — with your support, they can still enjoy play, companionship, and the daily routines that bring them comfort.

The most important step you can take as a pet parent is to stay observant and proactive. Keep up with regular veterinary exams, especially if your dog is a high-risk breed, diabetic, or entering their senior years. Protect their environment, provide the care and reassurance they need, and never underestimate their ability to thrive even with changing vision.

Sources and References

^{1,3,4,6,8} [Chewy, June 5, 2025](#)
^{2,5} [VCA Animal Hospitals, Cataracts in Dogs](#)
⁷ [Michigan State University, Cataract Surgery](#)
