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CARING FOR YOUR BLIND PET

Unfortunately blindness in our pets occurs more often than we would like. Your sadness and concern for your pet's future well-being is natural and appropriate. Causes of blindness include retinal disease with no known treatment, retinal detachments, serious eye injuries, cataracts, glaucoma, and a variety of other diseases.

Vision in cats and dogs is quite different from ours. They have better night vision and peripheral vision than we do but their ability to focus and see fine details is less developed. Also, they do not have well developed color vision. They utilize their senses of hearing and smell very efficiently. Because of this, loss of vision in cats and dogs is less traumatic compared to the loss of vision in people. They will not feel sorry for themselves and usually adapt very well to the loss of vision within 1-2 months. During this time many changes occur. They will bump into things and may sleep more often. It can be a difficult time for you and your pet. Most of these signs will pass with time. Over 95% of blind pets readily memorize the layout of their home and yard and can function normally with poor or no vision. It does take time for them to learn to get around using their other senses. Many people have a misunderstanding as to how well blind dogs and cats function as pets. They will make very happy pets with some help from you to make their life a little easier.

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GUIDELINES FOR CARING FOR A BLIND PET

1. Memory is used to negotiate the house. Avoid any changes in the environment, such as furniture or food bowls. If your pet is placed in a new environment, allow time to adjust to the new surroundings. Be careful of stairways, open doors, or other objects that could injure your pet.
2. Teach them to walk with a harness or lead so they can be exercised safely. Encourage exercise, either in a fenced area or on a leash to prevent excessive weight gain. Make sure in-ground pools have an enclosure around them to prevent your pet from slipping in.
3. Encourage them to use their senses to compensate for vision loss. Buy noisy toys or toys that have a recognizable odor. You can also use things such as perfume (i.e. lavender oil) by their food bowl and favorite sleeping areas.
4. Some behavior changes (aggression, depression, fear) can sometimes be observed with sudden blindness. Avoid stressing or scaring blind pets. Instruct family members (especially children) to vocalize the pet's name and approach them slowly. This fear usually passes with time as your pet adjusts.
5. Most causes of blindness are not painful so the quality of life is good. If pain is involved it will cause a pet to be depressed and lethargic. Other signs to watch for include: reddening of the white part of the eye, increased size of the eye, large amounts of discharge from the eye, and scratching at the eye.

You will have a lot of well-intentioned but often misinformed advice from friends and relatives that range from “putting your pet to sleep” to getting an eye transplant. The first is not recommended and the second is not possible. Blind dogs and cats can have a good quality of life and make wonderful pets as long as attention is paid to their special needs. Please call our office if you have any questions or concerns.