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PROGRESSIVE RETINAL ATROPHY

The retina acts like the film in a camera. Progressive retinal atrophy (PRA) refers to a large group of retinal diseases that can occur in purebred and occasionally mix breed dogs. The different types of PRA are inherited and cause blindness, but the age that vision loss begins can vary. This makes it difficult to predict how long a specific dog will retain vision. Some breeds develop blindness in their later years of life. A similar condition occurs in humans and is known as retinitis pigmentosa. Early identification of PRA is helpful in breeding animals to prevent transmitting the PRA gene. Currently, blood tests are available to identify PRA prior to vision problems in the following breeds:

Labrador Retriever
Chesapeake Bay Retriever
Portuguese Water Dog
Briard
Samoyed

Miniature and Toy Poodle
English Cocker Spaniel
Miniature Schnauzer
Siberian Husky
Mastiff breeds

The earliest sign of PRA is usually trouble seeing at night, which can result in disorientation or reluctance to go outside in the dark. You may notice an abnormal shine coming from the eyes. This abnormal shine is because the pupils are dilated and are not responding well to light and the retina is thinner than normal. The veterinary ophthalmologist examines the retina with an instrument called an indirect ophthalmoscope. There are changes in the retina that are typical for PRA. However, in early cases and in some breeds, PRA causes little or no visible changes in the retina. In these cases, an electronic test to assess retinal function (electroretinogram or ERG) may be necessary to make a diagnosis.

There are no cures for PRA, although vitamin therapies have been suggested to help potentially slow the degenerative progress. At this time, vitamin treatment has not been proven to reverse or stop vision loss. PRA alone is not painful, but it can result in cataracts and other secondary changes. An annual exam by a veterinary ophthalmologist is important, as these changes can become painful if not monitored and treated. Dogs usually adjust well to vision loss with only minor alterations in their daily life.