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Cataracts

What are cataracts?

The normal lens of the eye is a focusing device. It is completely clear and is suspended in position by little fibers called “zonules”. Despite its clarity, the lens is in fact made up of tissue fibers. As the animal ages, the lens cannot change its size and grow larger; instead, it becomes more compact with fibers. This condition is called “nuclear sclerosis” and is responsible for the cloudy-eyed appearance of older dogs – but the dog can still see through the lenses – these are not cataracts. A cataract is a disorder of the eye in which the lens becomes cloudy over time and impairs vision. It can be caused by a variety of things, including old age, infection within the eye, Diabetes, toxic substances, congenital defects, or due to trauma. In general, cataracts are almost always progressive and will become worse (more cloudy) as time goes by. If the opacity involves the entire lens, the eye will be blind.

Diabetic Cataracts

Many things can cause the lens to develop a cataract. A special and common cause is Diabetes mellitus. In this condition, the blood sugar soars as does the sugar level of the eye fluids. The fluid of the eye’s anterior chamber is the fluid that normally nurtures the lens but in the diabetic pet the lens can only utilize so much sugar. Excess absorbed sugar is transformed into sorbitol within the lens which unfortunately draws water into the lens causing an irreversible cataract in each eye. Cataracts are unavoidable in diabetic dogs no matter how good the insulin regulation is; diabetic cats have alternative sugar metabolism in the eye and do not get cataracts.

Why are cataracts bad?

The obvious answer to this question is that your pet will progressively lose its site and may become completely blind. There are several other reasons that cataracts are a worrisome problem. A cataract can “luxate”, or slip out of place. This can lead to the lens floating around in the eye where it can cause damage. If it settles so as to block the natural fluid drainage of the eye, glaucoma can develop (a build up of pressure within the eye and also a serious condition).

Cataracts can also begin to dissolve after they have been present long enough. This leads to deep inflammation in the eye and creates a condition called “uveitis” which is in itself painful and can lead to glaucoma.

Treatment

Unfortunately, there is no effective medical treatment for cataracts. Surgical removal of the cataract is the only effective treatment. The most common method of surgical correction is called “phacoemulsification” and consists of ultrasonic shattering and removal of the damaged lens through tiny incisions in the eye. This is of course an expensive and invasive surgery and any owner who opts for surgery should be prepared for several weeks worth of intensive medicating. There is a period of several weeks both before and after the surgery which would require frequent topical medications to control inflammation within the eye. Certain tests would need to be done prior to surgery to determine whether your pet has a functional retina behind the cataract and could benefit from cataract surgery. The surgery is a referral procedure and you would likely be sent to one of the teaching universities in the area (Tufts or Cornell). An overall success rate of 90% is described after cataract surgery.

What if it goes untreated?

A cataract by itself does not necessarily require treatment. If there is no associated inflammation and no associated glaucoma and the only problem is visual deficits, it is perfectly reasonable to do nothing. Blind animals have good quality of life and do well, though it is important not to move furniture around or leave any hazardous clutter in the home. You should, however, have your pets eyes monitored by your veterinarian on a regular basis to look for changes associated with inflammation or glaucoma.