

Commonly Asked Questions and Answers About Cataracts

What is a cataract?

The normal lens in the eye is used to focus light on the retina. It is similar in function of a camera lens and the retina is like the film in the camera. A cataract is an opacity or cloudiness in the lens. It can be very small and not affect vision or involve the entire lens and cause blindness.

What causes cataracts?

The most common cause of cataract in dogs is an inherited defect in the lens. These cataracts usually occur at a young age and are called juvenile cataracts. In addition, cataracts may occur due to injury to the eye, inflammation in the eye, or a systemic disease such as diabetes. In an older dog, the lens may develop into a cataract as a degenerative aging process. It is normal for the lens to become slightly grey to blue in color when a dog reaches approximately 6-7 years of age. This is called lenticular (or nuclear) sclerosis. It will occur in every animal and does not usually affect vision. It is often mistaken for cataracts.

Are some breeds more likely to develop cataracts?

Cataracts are more likely to be found in popular purebred dogs and cats since the breeding of related animals allows the abnormal genes to be concentrated. All animals, including birds, fish, and reptiles, may develop cataracts.

Is surgery the only way to cure cataracts?

The only treatment for cataracts is surgical removal. Many claims for nonsurgical "cures" have been made since the beginning of time, but all have been proven ineffective.

Is my pet too old for cataract surgery?

Old age is not considered a disease. Therefore, if a pet is healthy and does not have any serious ailments such as heart failure, general anesthesia can be recommended and cataract surgery performed.

What is required before surgery?

A complete examination of the eyes is necessary to determine if a pet is a good surgical candidate. Usually an electroretinogram (ERG) is required to test the retinal function of the eye. Also important is the pet's general health. A blood sample is submitted for a laboratory evaluation to make sure the internal organs are functioning normally. Medications are administered beginning a few days prior to surgery.

What is an electroretinogram (ERG)?

For cataract surgery to be successful the rest of the eye must be healthy. Usually the lens is so cloudy that the retina can not be examined by the ophthalmologist. The ERG is an electronic test which enables the ophthalmologist to determine if the retinal function is normal. This painless test is performed prior to surgery and is done without anesthesia. Cataract surgery will be recommended only if the results are normal.

How does cataract surgery work?

Cataract removal is a delicate surgical procedure. Surgery is usually performed in the morning on an outpatient basis. The cataracts are removed using a technique called phacoemulsification, which is the same technique used in people. It uses ultrasonic vibrations to liquefy the lens, which is then removed from the eye through a small incision. The incision is less than half the width of a pencil eraser.

What is the aftercare like?

After surgery, additional medications are sent home along with complete instructions. Follow-up visits are very important to monitor the healing process and detect any complications early. Most pets are seen the day after surgery, then one week postop, 3 weeks postop, 6 weeks postop, 6 months postop, and then annually. Some complications may not appear until as long as a year after surgery, so these rechecks are important. The success of the surgery is directly related to post-surgery treatment and monitoring. Vision will return as the healing in the eye takes place. For this reason, vision may not be apparent immediately after surgery. Reports are sent to your regular veterinarian to keep them informed of your pet's progress.

Should I wait until my pet is blind to do cataract surgery?

No. Once a cataract is showing signs of progression, even if it is just in one eye, then surgery should be considered in the affected eye. As the cataract matures, it becomes harder and more difficult to remove through the small incision. Other complications can occur in the eye as the cataract matures which can make surgery more difficult or in severe cases not possible. Serious vision-threatening complications that may occur after surgery include glaucoma and retinal detachment. Both of these complications are less likely if the cataract is removed early.

Are there artificial lenses for dogs?

Yes. An artificial lens restores the vision to as close to normal as possible. Lens implants are available at Animal Eye Associates and

are used with routine phacoemulsification cataract surgery. In certain cases, instability of the cataract or complications during surgery prevent the placement of an artificial lens. If an artificial lens can not be placed, your pet will still be able to see. However, objects up close will appear blurry. Most pets can see and conduct routine activities even if they do not receive an artificial lens.

What about laser surgery?

Lasers have many uses in human and veterinary ophthalmology; however, lasers have not been used in clinical cases to remove a cataract. Laser cataract surgery is an experimental procedure that is not yet ready for use on patients.

What are the benefits of cataract surgery?

The eye that is blinded by cataract will be visual if the cataract can be removed without complications. Generally, cataract surgery is successful in 90-95% of the cases and pets will resume normal activity following successful surgery.

What if my pet is not a candidate for cataract surgery?

Some pets can not have cataract surgery, for reasons such as a poor ERG result or otherwise poor health. Cataracts cause irritation in the eye, which can lead to secondary problems like glaucoma. For this reason, pets with cataracts that are not having surgery will still receive eye drops and regular monitoring to decrease any irritation and keep the eyes comfortable.