

Benadryl and Drops Right Treatment for Conjunctivitis

Dry, windy conditions can cause dogs' irritated eyes.

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Q. I live at 7,000-foot elevation in northern Arizona where it is dry and presently windy. Not much is growing right now, but the wind is blowing pollen in from the desert. Five of my nine dogs have gummy eyes lately but are otherwise fine.

Bailey, an Australia Shepherd-Chow Chow mix had swollen eyes when I got home one day. She was uncomfortable and rubbing her eyes. She loved it when I rubbed them for her. I gave her a Benadryl and used some lubricant drops in her eyes. She calmed down quite a bit with the Benadryl. This morning she seemed 90 percent better, but I want to know if it is OK to give her these medications.

A. If you had come into our emergency room, I wouldn't have done anything different (except charge you an exam fee). Dogs who live in dusty or windy environments often end up with chronic eye irritation, a type of conjunctivitis. Although it can also be caused by blunt trauma (for example, running into a branch), or by a superficial infection, the most common cause is irritation by dust, wind and a dry climate. Dogs who stick their heads out car windows also can end up with reddened, irritated eyes.

The treatment for conjunctivitis caused by irritation is usually artificial tears, which you have started. Sometimes, if the eyes are exceedingly red, adding a steroid ointment or drops to reduce inflammation is helpful. Antibiotic ointment is rarely needed, unless there is evidence of an infection, such as a thick discharge from one or both eyes.

Benadryl, or diphenhydramine, is generally a safe and effective over-the-counter remedy for itchy eyes or skin. It should be given at a dose of 1 mg per pound, so a 50-pound dog could get about 50 mg. Since it is formulated for infants, it is available as a liquid that can also be dosed for small dogs. You can give another dose every four to eight hours as needed. One side effect, which some dog owners like, is mild sedation, which can be helpful in a dog that may scratch all night.