

In the Blink of an Eye

Glaucoma blinds before most owners even notice a problem, but gene therapy offers hope.

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Research into improved techniques may offer hope, but at present veterinarians are reluctant to perform surgery as a preventive measure on good eyes because glaucoma surgery doesn't enjoy an overwhelming success rate, Dr. Gelatt said.

When vision is lost, veterinarians try to keep the dogs as pain-free and medication-free as possible. Several techniques are available, including: Injecting antibiotics into the eye to reduce fluid pressure by killing the fluid-producing cells. Injecting an antiviral drug into the eye to damage fluid-producing cells an experimental treatment with little success so far. Replacing the eye with a prosthetic (i.e., glass eye) which must be cleaned daily to avoid infection. Removing the contents of the eye and placing a silicone implant in the eye "she'll." Removing the eye and sewing the lids shut.

Eye removal is the only way to ensure the lack of pain, but most dog owners balk at the prospect of looking at an eyeless face, so veterinarians tend to treat blind dogs for pain. "We're treating the patient because of pain, we're treating the client because of cosmetics," Dr. Gelatt said.

Orr elected not to have Patches' eyes removed. "I want him to feel that he's got eyes and to blink," she said, "I can't even imagine having his eyes sewn shut." Orr gives Patches a drug to suppress fluid production and steroid drops if he rubs his face on the carpet or puts his paw over his eye, or if an eye appears puffy. The drugs work fast and allow for a more natural look, she said.

Dogs that lose sight can adjust. Owners must learn not to rearrange furniture, set packages on the floor, or move the dog's food or water bowl. Fences, railings, gates and shrubbery can protect blind dogs from drowning hazards, such as pools, ponds and hot tubs, and falling hazards, such as balconies, decks and stairs. Owners learn to be "seeing-eye people." Orr has taught Patches, now 15, the word "Step" and uses the command to help him negotiate stairs.

"We don't take him to unfamiliar areas, board him or leave him at the vet's or groomer's," Orr said. The family has made accommodations such as building railings and planting shrubbery to keep him from falling off the deck.