

When Your Dog Can't See Straight

Veterinary ophthalmologists specialize in taking care of Dog vision.

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Although you've probably never seen a dog wearing glasses, animals do have their own ophthalmologists. Not to be confused with optometrists, who test and fit people for glasses and contacts, ophthalmologists are doctors with medical or veterinary degrees who specialize in diseases and disorders of the eye.

Keeping eyes healthy is important for all species, since untreated eye problems can lead to vision loss and health problems that affect the rest of the body. Ralph Hamor, DVM, a veterinary ophthalmologist at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana, explains that eye problems can also indicate systemic diseases such as diabetes.

Basic ophthalmology is taught in veterinary school, so most general practitioners treat minor eye problems such as conjunctivitis, or pink eye, and perform surgeries to treat superficial conditions such as rolled-in eyelids. However, for problems that are serious or require special diagnostics, treatments, or surgeries, veterinarians typically refer patients to ophthalmic specialists, who have three additional years of residency training on the eye.

According to Hamor, veterinary ophthalmologists frequently see some conditions that are similar to those seen in human patients, such as cataracts, glaucoma, and ingrown eyelashes. Unlike humans, who only have two eyelids, many species have a third eyelid, and this eyelid can turn inside out, resulting in a condition called cherry eye. Veterinary ophthalmologists can correct this problem with surgery.

Ophthalmologists don't work solely with the eyes. Eye health is connected to other disease, and the eyes give clues as to what is happening in rest of the body. Ophthalmologists work with internists, cardiologists, neurologists, and oncologists. For example, an ophthalmologist may work closely with a cardiologist on cases involving hypertension, which can predispose dogs and cats to retinal hemorrhage and detachment.

Like most veterinary specialties, veterinary ophthalmology is a growing field. Although many general practitioners have experience with the eyes and keep themselves educated on advances in ophthalmology, they may still refer serious cases to specialists who have specialized training, experience, materials, and equipment.