

Contact Lenses for Your Dog?

Veterinarians foresee medical benefits in them.

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Sushi, a 16-year-old Tibetan Terrier, had a history of chronic eye problems, starting with a cataract when she was 2. When she began rubbing one eye with a paw, squinting and seeming to be in pain, owner Vicki Coen, a psychotherapist in Seattle, knew she needed to get her to a veterinarian. The diagnosis: a corneal ulceration, an abrasion of the eye's clear surface. Sushi had surgery, then was fitted with a contact lens much to Coen's surprise.

"Then I realized how medicine in animals and humans is so much alike now," she said. The lens fell out after six days, which was expected, and when Coen took Sushi for a follow-up exam, the eye was healed. The idea of a dog wearing contact lenses may seem ridiculous at first. "I've gotten a whole spectrum of responses," said Mary B. Glaze, DVM, a board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist and professor at the Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine in Baton Rouge. "Some people laugh. I've even had veterinarians look at me as if I'm insane, but a lot of people also think it's wonderful."

Lenses primarily act as a bandage for an injured cornea instead of correcting a vision problem.

Tinted contact lenses could be used to hide a dog's scarred, disfigured eye, usually for the owner's comfort in looking at the pet. The American Kennel Club, however, prohibits their use in show dogs.

"The issue hasn't ever come up per se, but any kind of attachment like that to a dog would have to be removed before they entered the show ring," said AKC Secretary James Crowley.

Contact lenses for medical use are generally the soft type, which means they contain a high percentage of water. These are called therapeutic soft contact lenses, or TSCLs. After application in human medicine, a few veterinarians began trying TSCLs in dogs, cats and horses in the late 1970s.

"Veterinarians had to use human contact lenses, and there were a lot of problems with fitting them and getting them to stay in, so early results were discouraging," said Kent Jordan, director of product management for The Cutting Edge Division near Sacramento, California. The company introduced animal contacts in 1990 and now makes them for dogs, cats and horses and has even custom-made a contact lens for an elephant.

The dog lenses vary in diameters and base curves to fit the cornea comfortably. Corneal curvatures aren't usually measured in dog patients, so fitting a lens may involve some trial and error, Dr. Glaze said.