

My dog was recently diagnosed with having dry eyes. His eyes are a little goopy but they seem OK. How serious is this and is the treatment important?

Keratoconjunctivitis Sicca (dry eye) is a common condition in dogs where the eyes do not produce an adequate amount of tears. The decline in tear production causes a thick, mucoid discharge to build up on the eyes. This condition could be painful for your pet and the thick mucus can cause a decline in vision. Some pets may squint the eyes or may rub at the eyes. The eyes can also become red and cloudy as a result of dry eye. Treatment is very important to help keep your pet comfortable and to help maintain vision as long as possible.

The first step in treatment is to address the loss of tear production. Your veterinarian will likely prescribe artificial tears to provide the needed moisture and washing action of the normal tear production until the problem appears controlled. The more severe the dry eye, the more frequent a moisturizing product is needed. This can be inconvenient since you may have to apply the artificial tears several times a day to help achieve adequate lubrication on the eyes.

The second step is to determine and treat the underlying cause of dry eye. One common cause is damage to the lacrimal glands and surface of eye that produce the tears. Chronic inflammation due to immune mediated causes like allergies can cause chronic inflammation which results in the damage. Getting allergies under control can help reduce the inflammation and allow the tear producing cells to function normally. Topical immune modulators like cyclosporine and tacrolimus have been shown to help reduce the body's response to allergies and other triggers and stimulate tear production. Unfortunately their use does not result in immediate improvement and it may take as long as 16 weeks to see any improvement, especially in severe cases.

When dry eye is diagnosed, the cornea may be very dry and therefore susceptible to infections. It is important that your veterinarian examine your pet and determine if there are any corneal ulcers or infections present. Your veterinarian may prescribe antibiotic eye medications as needed. The cornea may become cloudy or scarred if the condition is not diagnosed quickly. It is very important to take the advice your veterinarian has given you and start treatment immediately.