

Love Is **Blind**



FAQs About
Blind Dogs and Cats

FAQs About Blind Dogs

Opening up your home to a blind dog can be a wonderful experience. With a little knowledge and ingenuity, you can enhance your blind dog's quality of life and have a great time together. Many people say their blind dogs have taught them a great deal about courage, joy and love.

What causes blindness in dogs?

In dogs, partial or total loss of vision can be present from birth, may happen suddenly as a result of injury or illness, or may come on gradually due to old age. Some of the more common and serious canine eye disorders that can cause blindness are cataracts, glaucoma, progressive retinal atrophy (PRA) and sudden acquired retinal degeneration syndrome (SARDS).

In what ways are blind dogs different from dogs with sight?

Like dogs who can see, they have a highly developed sense of smell, so they use smell and their other senses to compensate for their lack of vision. If the loss of sight is gradual, behavior changes may be subtle and not noticeable until the dog is completely blind.

Sudden blindness can result in more dramatic behavior changes: The dog is disoriented and hesitant when walking, and bumps into things. However, a blind dog usually finds new ways to navigate in his environment and overcomes challenges by using his remaining abilities. Generally, dogs accept and adjust to their disability over time.

Does it take a special type of person to adopt a blind dog?

Many different types of people take blind dogs into their homes and families. Experience with blindness isn't necessary. Love and commitment to the adopted pet are the most important things.

Will a blind dog require more of a time commitment?

Blind dogs, just like dogs who can see, require time, patience and energy devoted to training and socialization to help them become well-adjusted and well-mannered. As with any dog, it's important to develop a trusting relationship and build the dog's confidence through positive interactions.

Is a blind dog difficult to train?

Many people think that training a blind dog is difficult, but that isn't true. Clicker training is a simple style of training that uses a clicking sound as a reward marker to tell the dog when he or she has gotten it right. Clicker training fits in nicely with a blind dog's listening skills. A positive reinforcement method such as clicker training lets your dog have fun while learning and also encourages the development of a trusting relationship with you.

Before you start training, it's helpful for you to know what cues your dog already knows. Often, blind dogs are taught to respond to the cue "watch," so they can avoid things in their way, and the cues "step up" and "step down" so they can

safely navigate curbs and stairs. Knowing what cues your dog knows will give you a foundation on which to build.

How can I keep a blind dog safe in my home and yard?

First, help the dog to learn the layout of your home and yard by walking him through each space on a leash, offering treats and praise. To encourage him to explore, you can scatter kibble throughout the house or around the yard. The dog will search for the kibble, following the scent. It's a good idea to set up a "home base" containing the dog's bed, crate, and food and water bowls.

Once he knows the layout of your home, avoid rearranging the furniture and don't leave boxes, toys or other objects in walking paths. Carpet runners can be used to guide your dog through safe areas.

Also, your home may contain obstacles, such as stairs or sharp corners on furniture, that could be dangerous for a blind pet, so get down to your dog's eye level to identify any potential hazards. Then, make a plan for minimizing or eliminating those hazards. For example, put a baby gate across the doorway leading to steps and cover sharp corners on furniture with soft packing material or bubble wrap.

In your yard, trim bushes that have eye-height branches and place a trail of sand, bark chips, mulch or landscape rocks around trees and unsafe areas. The difference in texture on the ground will warn the dog that an obstacle or something unsafe is ahead. If you have an in-ground swimming pool or fish pond, you'll need to fence off that area.

How well does a blind dog adapt to change?

Some adapt well and quickly, while for others it takes time. Encouragement, reassurance and rewards are essential. Try to be sensitive to how adaptable your new family member is, and be patient as he learns about his new environment.

You can use scents and sounds to help him adjust. Use scented oils (e.g., vanilla, citrus, pine) or perfumes to lightly spray things that your blind dog could bump into. Choose one scent to indicate safe areas and another scent to indicate dangerous areas. To help your dog recognize different rooms, try marking different rooms with different scents.

If you are leaving your dog in an unfamiliar environment for a while, such as a friend's home or a grooming shop, bring a piece of clothing with your scent on it to place near your dog and provide reassurance.

How do I introduce other pets to my blind dog?

Just as you would with any new pet, you'll want to introduce your blind dog slowly to other pets in the household. You can initially separate them using a baby gate or a crate, or introduce them on harness and leash until you are sure that they are comfortable with each other. Sighted pets often know that something is different about a blind dog, and many will take on the role of a "seeing-eye friend."

When you're out in the world, keep in mind that a blind dog cannot see the body language that dogs use to communicate. So, when your dog is around other dogs, observe the body language of all the dogs to pick up on any discomfort and avoid problems.

How can I encourage my blind dog to play?

Blind dogs enjoy nose work or scent games, defined as any activity in which the dog uses his nose to locate a target scent or odor. These games are not only fun for blind dogs but also help to develop their self-confidence. Here's an example: Try scenting a tennis ball with vanilla or another smell that your dog finds enticing. Bounce the ball close enough for your dog to follow the sound or roll the ball through grass so that your dog can follow the scent. Toys that squeak or that "talk" or make animal sounds when touched are also lots of fun for a blind dog.

TIPS FOR ADOPTERS OF BLIND DOGS

To keep your blind dog safe and happy:

- Use identification: Microchip your dog and have him wear an ID tag with "blind dog" noted on it.
- Use a GPS tracker collar on your dog, especially if you're traveling.
- Always keep your dog on a leash when you're out walking. Use a harness rather than a collar for less stress to the dog's neck and eyes.
- Allow your dog to be off-leash only when you're in an enclosed area.

FAQs About Blind Cats

Blindness doesn't have to significantly affect a cat's quality of life. If you provide a safe, stimulating environment, a blind cat can continue to enjoy and remain engaged in life and the world around him or her.

What causes blindness in cats?

Some cats are born without eyes or with very small eyes that do not function. Others lose their sight as a result of illness, physical injury, brain damage or poisoning (including extreme reaction to anesthesia) and conditions such as glaucoma, cataracts or scarring caused by untreated in-turned eyelashes. High blood pressure is the most common cause of blindness in adult cats. A blind eye is often cloudy or the pupil remains dilated even in bright light.

How is a blind cat's behavior different from a sighted cat?

If the loss of sight is gradual, the cat compensates gradually and behavior changes may be slight and not noticeable until the cat is completely blind. Sudden blindness can result in more dramatic behavior changes: The cat is disoriented and hesitant when walking, bumps into things and may vocalize more often. Cats who become blind suddenly may also develop uncharacteristic behaviors until they learn to adapt. They may be unwilling to leave their sleeping area and may develop inappropriate toilet habits because they are unable to find the litter box. They may also be reluctant to explore, can appear withdrawn, and may meow when disoriented or in need of reassurance.

- Use eye protection for your dog (dog goggles) when you're outdoors, especially in places where there are low branches.
- Train your dog to be comfortable in a crate; it can be very useful in behavior management and training.
- Block off stairways with baby gates until your dog can navigate them safely.
- To let your blind dog know when someone is near, attach a small bell to your shoe or pant leg and to the collars of any other pets in the house.
- Speak to your dog when you enter or leave a room.
- To avoid startling your dog, speak to him when you are approaching to touch him (especially while he's sleeping).
- Feed your blind dog in the same place and put a rug under the water bowl. The texture change will let your dog know where the water bowl is.
- Leave a TV or radio playing softly near your pet's bed or favorite resting place. The sound is soothing, and may help prevent excess barking.
- As with any dog, a blind dog needs socialization, so take your dog for walks in a variety of environments: parks, city streets, the country.
- Enlist help from friends, family or neighbors to help socialize your dog. Before allowing them to approach or touch him, make sure your dog is aware that new people are present.

Most blind cats accept and adjust to their disability. They find new ways to navigate in their environment and overcome challenges by using their remaining senses. With a little help from their families, they can have full and happy lives.

How do blind cats navigate in their environment?

Blind cats rely on touch, scent, sound and memory to find their way around. To judge proximity to objects, they use their whiskers a lot more than sighted cats. This means that their whiskers are subjected to more wear and tear than usual, so their whiskers can be broken or even worn down. Some blind cats appear to listen for sound echoes to help them navigate, and some also walk with their tail tip touching the ground as an additional sense organ.

Blind cats may climb onto things, rather than jumping, but many also memorize heights and distances. Because they rely on memory to navigate, furniture should not be rearranged and obstructions should not be left on the floor when there is a blind cat in the house.

How do I introduce my adopted blind cat to my home?

Generally, you can use the same method that you would use to settle a sighted cat into your home — starting with one room and expanding this territory over time. For a blind cat, you will need to take extra care that the surroundings are safe, so progress may be slower. Encouragement, reassurance and rewards are essential.

Start by establishing a main room or “safe room” containing food, water, bedding and a litter box. Spend time in the room with your cat, petting and playing with her and giving special treats. Leaving a radio playing on low volume will also provide comfort. Once your cat gets her bearings in the main room, extend the boundaries of her environment to include other rooms. Supervise these excursions until your cat seems confident. You can use treats to lure your cat into new areas. If you live in a home with multiple floors, temporarily block off the stairs.

Let your cat spend the night in the main room until she is confident and has memorized the layout of your home. To move the cat’s main territory from the safe room to a more appropriate area, duplicate the contents of the safe room (food, water, bedding and litter box) to transition the cat to a preferred area of the house.

How do I introduce other pets to my blind cat?

Just as you would with any new pet, you’ll want to introduce your blind cat slowly to other pets in the household. You can initially separate them using a baby gate or a crate, or introduce them on harness and leash until you are sure that they are comfortable with each other. Sighted pets often know that something is different about a blind cat, and many will take on the role of a “seeing-eye friend.”

How do I play with my blind cat?

Toys that make sounds, give off scents or contain treats are enjoyable to a blind cat. Be creative. Noisy toys such as balls with bells in them or something as simple as a scrunched-up paper bag will provide stimulation. Many blind cats learn how to dribble paper balls or jingly toys across a room.

How can I train my blind cat?

By using positive reinforcement training, you can develop your blind cat’s remaining abilities and create plenty of fun activities with the use of scent and sound. Clicker training is a simple training method that uses a clicking sound as a reward marker to tell your pet when she has gotten it right. Clicker training fits in nicely with a blind cat’s listening skills.

TIPS FOR ADOPTERS OF BLIND CATS

To keep your blind cat happy and safe:

- Use identification: Microchip your cat and have her wear an ID tag with “blind cat” noted on it.
- Attach a Cat Locator pendant to the cat’s collar. The pendant emits a tone when the handheld applicator is activated, to help you find your blind cat.
- Don’t let her loose outdoors. A blind cat is easily disoriented and should not be allowed to roam outdoors.
- For safe, enjoyable outings, teach your cat to walk with a harness and leash.
- Construct a cattery to enable your cat to enjoy the outdoors safely.
- Once you’ve established spots for your cat’s litter box and food and water bowls, don’t move them.
- Blind cats rely on scent and memory to find their way around. They may also memorize heights and distances when jumping. Therefore, keep furniture in the same place and keep the floors clean of clutter.
- If your cat is prone to bumping into furniture, pad table legs and chair legs with a soft material or bubble wrap.
- Carrying a blind cat around can be disorienting for her. If you do pick up your cat and carry her about, set her down in a familiar place, such as her feeding or sleeping area.
- Don’t lift a blind cat and put her on a raised surface. She may become disoriented and fall off. (This might not apply if the cat is lifted onto a familiar surface, such as a favorite chair or your bed.)
- Cats use their whiskers to help them feel their way around in narrow spaces, so a blind cat’s whiskers should never be trimmed.
- Block off stairways with baby gates until your cat can navigate them safely.
- Block off access to windows and balconies.
- Make sure that your cat is never around candles or open flames.
- To let your blind cat know when someone is near, attach a small bell to your shoe or pant leg and to the collars of any other pets in the house.
- Speak to your cat when you enter or leave a room.
- To avoid startling your cat, speak to her when you are approaching to touch her (especially while she’s sleeping).
- Provide toys that have a squeaking, chirping or crinkling sound, or give catnip toys that your cat can smell.

For more about caring for and training pets, go to bestfriends.org/resources/pet-care