

Dry Eye Syndrome in Cavalier King Charles Spaniels

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What is Dry Eye?

Also known as Keratoconjunctivitis sicca (KCS), this condition prevents the normal production of tears, and if left untreated may eventually lead to total blindness. Tears are necessary to lubricate, clean and protect the surface of the eye, and further keep the eye healthy by carrying nutrients, and assisting in the control of infection and the healing process. The condition has the potential to cause such chronic irritation to the cornea that the resultant scarring from repeated ulcerations may cause blindness.



KCS can be caused in a number of different ways:

1. Genetic predisposition

A number of breeds have a predisposition for developing KCS, and in a few the condition is congenital, with the lacrimal glands (the ones producing tears) being very small at birth, or even absent altogether. In Cavaliers these lacrimal glands are destroyed by an autoimmune reaction against them.

2. Non-genetic causes

Viral infection eg distemper

Drug toxicity

Immunologic diseases eg atopy, adenitis

Chronic conjunctivitis

Radiation

Neurogenic

Incidence in Cavaliers

Low

What are the Signs or Symptoms?

The symptoms will vary depending on the extent of the reduction in tear production, but will initially begin with the eye looking red and inflamed, along with an accompanying thick discharge. Your dog will show discomfort by squinting, pawing at their eyes or being sensitive to light. The cornea may also be obviously dull and dry. If the condition becomes chronic, infections and painful corneal ulcerations will become common, and eventually the cornea will become thickened with scar tissue until total blindness may result. KCS may develop in both eyes at the same time, or more commonly in one, followed by the other soon after.

How is it Diagnosed?

Presentation to a veterinary surgeon with a dog with the above symptoms may lead to a diagnosis. Drops of a fluorescing dye put into the eye will identify any ulcerations, and a Schirmer Tear Test (STT) will indicate if there is normal tear production for the breed.

How is it Treated?

It's very important to get an early diagnosis for KCS, so treatment can begin quickly in order to prevent the condition from becoming chronic and running the risk of vision loss. Unfortunately, for most causes of KCS, tear production will never return, and so treatments will need to be ongoing for the rest of your dog's life, and generally on a daily basis. It is important to keep the dog's eyes clean and to remove any dried discharge. The eyes must also be kept moist, so the addition of artificial tear solutions frequently throughout the day may be necessary. If some ability for tear production remains, then there are medications to stimulate this production, and if these work well, may only need to be added once daily, or in some cases every second day. There may also be a requirement every now and then to treat for infection, inflammation or corneal ulcerations, especially if the eye has become too dry.

There is a surgical option available in extreme cases when medications can't control the condition. However, it is not a particularly successful option, and so should only be considered when there is no alternative. It involves moving a salivary duct to the eye, thus allowing saliva to keep the eye moist. The flow of saliva can't be controlled well, saliva doesn't do as good a job on the eye as tears do, and it can also be irritating to the cornea, causing discomfort following surgery.

How can you Avoid Buying a Dog with Dry Eye?

It is not known how KCS is passed on in breeds which show a predisposition for the disease. However, responsible breeders will generally not breed with affected dogs. Ensure that the puppy, and the parents of a puppy you are considering purchasing are taken to a veterinarian for a simple eye examination under the guidelines set out by an accredited canine eye scheme. Responsible breeders will generally have certification done on their breeding stock on an annual basis.

In USA, the Canine Eye Registration Foundation (CERF) can direct you towards members of the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists for eye exams. In UK, the British Veterinary Association (BVA) conducts eye exams, and in Australia, contact the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) for examinations conducted under the Australian Canine Eye Scheme (ACES)