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Living with a Deaf Dog

When we think of dogs who are different—dogs with disabilities—we generally first think of dogs with obvious, visible differences. For instance, we may get a mental image of a dog with three legs, or missing an eye, or perhaps a dog who is paralyzed. We may simply overlook the invisible disabilities a dog may be living with. Deafness is one of these hidden issues.

Deaf dogs are just like hearing dogs in all other ways. When we discover that a dog is deaf, or if we are considering adopting a deaf dog, it is important to sort through the misinformation to learn how to best live with a deaf canine companion.

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How do dogs become deaf?

As dogs age, they can suffer hearing loss just as humans tend to. Generally, this is a gradual process, so it may be difficult to notice. The eardrums become less flexible, and sounds are not transmitted as effectively. Some dogs lose their hearing as a result of chronic ear infections. Still others may suffer a traumatic injury to the ear, resulting in hearing loss. Finally, some dogs are born deaf because of a genetic defect; this is called "congenital deafness." In most cases of congenital deafness, the deafness is pigment related, and most of these dogs have an all-white or mostly white haircoat. These dogs are not albino, which is a complete lack of all pigment. They do have color in the irises of their eyes, and they may have color in their skin or in part of their haircoat. Examples of breeds that experience deafness related to pigment include:

- Australian shepherds
- Dalmatians
- Great Danes
- Welsh corgis

How will I know if my dog is deaf?

Generally, it is fairly straightforward to determine if a dog is deaf. Puppies who are deaf may seem slow to learn; they do not respond to their names or pick up verbal commands. Older dogs with acquired deafness may sleep through your arrival home from work.

A few simple tests can check a dog's hearing at home:

- Rattle keys.
- Squeak a toy.
- Clap your hands behind the dog.
- Ring a bell.
- Whistle.



If you get no response, it is a good bet that the dog is deaf.

Do I need to worry about any special health concerns with a deaf dog?

No. Deafness is generally not linked to any special health worries. Deaf dogs who are predominantly white can be more prone to sunburn, so it is wise to be aware of sun exposure. Also, some dogs with a “merle” color pattern (generally a patchwork of gray, silver and black, red and gray, or shades of red) can have eye problems, but this is not very common.

Deafness in dogs is generally not linked to any special health worries.

How do I train a deaf dog?

Deaf dogs learn very quickly to pay close attention to their surroundings. That makes it easy to work with their instincts when training. Because dogs naturally look to their humans for guidance, once we have their attention, we can teach them to associate specific hand signals and body language with the behaviors we desire. It may be worth seeking the assistance of a professional trainer who has experience working with deaf dogs.

What else should I be aware of to help my deaf dog?

The most important thing to remember with a deaf dog is that the dog is deaf. This may seem obvious, but we bear a special responsibility for deaf dogs. They cannot hear traffic or a honking automobile horn, so they must never be given an opportunity to be off leash on or near a street. They cannot hear to come when called, so we need to be careful to have them off leash only in contained areas. Deaf dogs may feel a vibration in the floor as we approach them, but they may not, so it is important not to sneak up and startle them. Often, firmly tapping a foot nearby is enough to wake them or get their attention. It is also important to teach children appropriate respect for deaf dogs.

With a bit of thought, consideration, and training (for both dog and human), deaf dogs can lead normal, long, rich, and happy lives.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Robin Downing, DVM, CVPP, CCRP, DAAPM.

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