

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.
- 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.

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