

### What to Expect When a Dog Goes Blind & How to Help Him Adapt

Sarah Vaughn's dog, Floyd, went blind suddenly four years ago. "I was distraught," she says. "I thought this was the end." Her reaction isn't unusual. It's upsetting to see a beloved pet confused, and most owners are entirely unprepared for how many routine activities are affected.



"The day that I completely lost it was when I took him to the vet and he wouldn't get out of the car because he couldn't see to jump down," says Vaughn, who found herself unable to figure out how to get her 90-pound dog out of her vehicle.

The vast majority of dogs will adapt and learn to get around. "They are still going to be happy, wonderful pets, although they may go through a period of confusion and difficulty.

#### **Safety First**

Dogs are individuals and react in different ways to losing their sight. But for all of them, there are some things you should do at the start. The first thing is to keep the dog safe. This may mean blocking off stairs or a swimming pool or putting cushioning around sharp things like the edge of a coffee table.

If your dog is crate trained, take advantage of safe downtime in the crate when you can't supervise. If not, consider using baby gates to restrict him to a few rooms, or use what's called an x-pen, which is a freestanding fence you can use to keep the dog in a limited area in the house. "Give them a smaller space to map out at first, then extend it.

Having a way to confine the dog at first can also help if the dog is having housetraining accidents, and it is especially helpful if you have more than one dog — you can separate them at feeding time if the sighted dog is stealing the blind one's food.

#### **Add Non-visual Cues**

As your dog is learning to find his way around, keep to a routine and try not to move furniture. Then, think about where to add tactile clues to identify important locations.

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If you have hardwood floors, put a stair runner at the top of the stairs that's a cue to them that's where the stairs start. Tactile cues can also help a dog avoid obstacles. You can put down three or four feet of gravel or wood chips along the fence in their yard so the dog can feel the change from grass and knows when to stop. You can use inexpensive scents that you already have in the house, like vanilla extract, near important locations like the bowls and the door where the dog goes outside.

Take advantage of sound as well. It's important to keep your dog active, and some may become reluctant to take walks, at least at first. When going for walks, attach a small bell to the laces of each shoe, clapping your hands or constantly talking to your dog help keep his attention.

Dogs that like to play ball can adjust to using a ball with a bell or that makes other noise when thrown. Although you can only throw it a few feet, it's better than not being able to play at all.

There is equipment you can buy or build that might help, but be sure it'll work for your particular situation. Ramps and stairs, for instance, can help a dog get in and out of the car or on and off the bed, but Vaughn found that the stairs were too steep and small for her large dog.

The transition will be easier if you do some training with them. The more you work with them the more you speed up their adjustment. If you don't train with them, they have to learn by their failures, and that's kind of demoralizing for all of us.

Training will help with safety as well. Teach them words like 'wait,' 'stop' — so that you speed up their recognition of obstacles. If you see he's about to hit the coffee table, you can say, 'Wait!'"

### **Patience Is Key**

It can be frustrating when you do something wrong or can't figure out how to help. So remember to be patient with yourself as well as with your dog. Also realize that no matter how much work you do, your dog will still have to learn some things on his own, and it may be hard to watch. There comes a point where you have to let the dog figure things out for itself.

There's no predicting how long it will take a dog to adjust, since all dogs react differently, but the dog's basic personality plays a big role. Dogs that are relaxed and laid-back to begin with often adapt the fastest. Those that had nervous personalities when they could see are probably going to have more anxiety, and it's going to take a longer time.

Although some dogs will seem cautious and subdued at first but if your dog's blindness has been

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diagnosed as due to SARDS (Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome), watch out for signs of severe depression. Research has shown that these dogs may have abnormal hormone levels.

### **Life Is Still Good**

Having a newly blind dog can be a lot like having a new dog — doing new training and adjusting to new ways to perform your old routines. But it may not change your life as much as you think in the long run. Often dogs are much more resilient than one would have thought.”

*Don't feel like it's the end of the dog's life or the end of happiness for that do.*