

# Deafness in Pets

Deafness in pets may be present at birth (congenital) or develop over time (acquired). Because hearing plays an important role in communication, safety, and behavior, recognizing the signs early can make a meaningful difference in your pet's quality of life.

## Congenital Deafness

Congenital deafness is present at birth and may be inherited or caused by factors that affect development before birth, such as infections, toxin exposure, certain medications, or metabolic disturbances.

Although congenital deafness can occur in any pet, it is more frequently associated with certain coat patterns, particularly those involving white pigmentation. In many of these cases, hearing loss develops early in life due to degeneration of structures within the inner ear, resulting in permanent loss of function. In some pets, however, deafness is caused by inner ear abnormalities that are not linked to pigmentation.

Deafness may affect one ear (unilateral) or both ears (bilateral). Pets with unilateral deafness often appear normal, which can delay recognition without specialized testing.

## Acquired Deafness

Acquired deafness occurs after birth and can result from a variety of conditions, including:

- Age-related degeneration
- Chronic or severe ear infections
- Medications known to affect hearing
- Trauma or head injury
- Neurological disease

Because hearing involves both the ear and the brain, deafness is not always just an ear issue. In some cases, it can be related to the nervous system—especially if other neurological signs are present.

## Signs

Clinical signs vary depending on severity and whether one or both ears are affected. Common observations include:

- Lack of response to name or familiar sounds
- Sleeping more deeply or difficulty waking
- Increased startle response when touched
- Excessive vocalization
- Trouble locating sounds
- Changes in behavior, training, or responsiveness

## Diagnosis

The gold standard for diagnosing hearing loss is Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response (BAER) testing, a noninvasive method that objectively evaluates the auditory system.

Small, painless electrodes are placed just under the skin on the head. A soft ear insert delivers a series of clicking sounds, and the equipment records how the auditory pathways respond. The results are displayed as waveforms, allowing a veterinary neurologist to determine whether the hearing pathways are functioning normally.

## Key advantages of BAER testing:

- Can be reliably performed starting at 6–8 weeks of age
- Takes approximately 10–15 minutes
- Provides objective results independent of behavior

## Prognosis

Deaf pets can still lead full, active, and rewarding lives. Most quickly adapt by relying more heavily on visual cues, body language, and environmental vibrations.

With consistent training and clear communication, deaf pets are just as capable of learning as hearing pets. They often become highly attentive to their surroundings and develop strong bonds with their owners.

## Care and Training Tips

Successful management focuses on clear, consistent communication and a safe environment.

## Communication and Training:

- Use consistent hand signals for commands such as sit, stay, come, and down
- Create a visual cue that represents your pet's name
- Use light signals or floor vibrations to gain attention
- Reinforce desired behaviors with treats, toys, or affection
- Maintain a predictable daily routine

## Safety Considerations:

- Approach your pet within their line of sight to avoid startling them
- Wake gently using food, light touch away from the face, or floor vibrations
- Teach children how to interact safely
- Monitor interactions with other pets, as deaf animals cannot hear warning cues
- Use a leash or provide a secure, controlled environment, especially outdoors

## Additional Recommendations:

- Use an ID tag indicating your pet is deaf or hearing impaired
- Consider a hearing companion pet to help with social and environmental cues

