

# What Did You Say? Your Deaf Dog or Cat

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

A lot of the same things that cause hearing loss in humans also cause hearing loss in dogs or cats. Dogs or cats can be born deaf (congenital deafness), or can become deaf because of some injury, disease, drug, or toxin (acquired deafness).

The most common cause of congenital deafness is related to the amount of pigment (coloring) that the dog or cat has. The proper development of the hearing mechanism depends partly on the development of pigment in certain cells of the inner ear. If there is no pigment development (as seen in dogs or cats who are white), these cells do not function properly and the animal may be deaf. A white animal with blue eyes is more likely to be deaf than a white animal who has gold, green, or brown eyes.



Acquired deafness can happen after an injury to the head or ear canal. Certain drugs, if used improperly at the wrong dosage or over a long period of time, can cause enough damage to the ear to cause deafness. Even chronic ear infections can eventually cause deafness.

It may be difficult to determine whether or not your dog or cat is deaf. A dog who doesn't respond to being called or to other noises may be deaf, or he may just have "selective hearing," meaning that he hears when he chooses to do so! Older animals may experience a gradual loss of hearing as part of the aging process. The only sure way to know if your dog or cat is deaf is to have a Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response (BAER) test done. This test is not painful, but it is only usually available at veterinary schools or large referral hospitals.

Dogs and cats who are deaf can lead long, healthy, happy lives. If you're patient with training, they can be taught obedience just like any hearing dog or cat. They can be taught simple sign language and can be taught to respond to commands.

If you believe that your dog or cat is deaf, start with a complete health checkup by your veterinarian. After receiving a clean bill of health, you can work with your deaf friend to teach him or her how to recognize basic commands. An additional health tip: Remember that dogs or cats with a predominantly white hair coat need protection from the harmful rays of the sun.

*Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.*