

# How to Change the Environment for a Pet That Is Deaf

## BACKGROUND

Pets that are deaf can live a long and healthy life; we simply communicate with them differently than other pets. Deaf animals enjoy playing with their peers and interacting with families. The main point is to take time to train ourselves to adapt to new methods of communicating with deaf animals.

Dogs and cats can be born deaf or can become deaf over time. Genetic defects can result in a puppy or kitten being born deaf; this is known as *congenital deafness*. An adult animal can lose his/her hearing as the result of an ear infection or injury to the ear, or gradual hearing loss very often occurs as the pet ages, as it does in people.

Dalmatians and white-coated cats are the breeds most commonly predisposed to congenital deafness. Owners of deaf puppies and kittens can train them to follow sign language. Older pets can be trained with sign language as well, ideally beginning at the first sign of hearing loss.

Caring for a hearing-impaired dog or cat is generally no different than caring for a pet with normal hearing, as far as feeding, playing, and general health care are concerned. The lack of hearing does raise some safety issues for pets that cannot hear a warning or detect the sound of a threat, for example, and in this way you and the pet's family members can provide lifesaving attention.

## GETTING STARTED

How would anyone know the difference between a pet that cannot hear and a pet that hears normally but is just too stubborn or too playful to listen? Initial suspicions come when a dog or cat not only fails to respond to commands but is easily startled when approached from behind. Older dogs, as they lose their hearing, can be caught doing something they normally would have stopped doing when they heard you come home, like lying on a bed where they are not supposed to be. The most common indication of deafness in puppies is the decreased response to noise stimuli and an increased response to vibrations. "Testing" a pet at home can be difficult, and one must remember to separate sound from vibration. Jingling keys, clapping hands, and squeaky toys are easy to use for stimulating a response based only on hearing. Some pets can hear very low or high tones and may perk up and look around to try to find the source of the noise; this kind of response is convincing, but lack of response sometimes can occur in dogs and cats that are not easily stimulated.

The definitive test for identifying deafness is the Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response (BAER) test. A BAER test can be performed at virtually any age (8 weeks or older) and can identify auditory function in each ear individually, meaning one-sided deafness can be identified if a hereditary concern exists about future breeding and transmitting congenital deafness. A BAER test requires the dog or cat to be sedated, and it utilizes computers to record the electrical activity of the brain in response to specific noise stimulation.

If your dog or cat is deaf, you may wish to purchase a sign language dictionary to aid in learning the commands necessary to train deaf dogs. Positive reinforcement with treats is mandatory, so careful selection of a low-calorie treat is imperative.

## TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

Waking a deaf dog from sleeping can be difficult and can alarm the pet, resulting in undesirable actions. Pets should be trained to

wake calmly and with positive reinforcement (see below). Untrained humans (especially children) should not be allowed to awaken deaf pets.

A deaf pet should wear a collar and tag that indicates its condition. If the dog becomes lost, this allows the person who finds the dog to understand why it is unresponsive to sound. The tag should also indicate the pet's name and phone number to facilitate contact with the pet's owner.

You should never allow your deaf pet out of your yard without a leash. If a pet is stimulated by something it wishes to chase, you may not have any way to call the dog back. The pet can then become injured or lost.

As with all pets, any pools or ponds should be secured to prevent pets from accidentally falling into the water and becoming injured.

## PROCEDURE

- When waking a deaf dog from sleep, start by placing your hand next to your dog's nose, allowing him/her to sniff. If this does not awaken the dog, lightly touch the shoulder blades until he/she wakes up. Once the dog has awakened, offer positive reinforcement with praise and a treat. This allows the pet to learn to wake in a calm, positive state. One may also tap the floor or create a "vibration" the pet can feel before your approach. Often, opening and closing doors will create a vibration, waking the pet when someone enters the home.
- Desensitize dogs to the startle effect of being touched unexpectedly. Begin by walking up behind the pet when he/she is not looking. Gently touch the dog, then immediately reward with a treat as soon as he/she turns around. The dog can quickly associate the good treat with being touched unexpectedly and can learn to respond happily.
- Hand signals can be taught to dogs who are congenitally deaf, as well as to those who become deaf later. The first commands to teach are sit, stay, lie down, and come. Once dogs have mastered these skills, additional signs can be taught. Dogs can learn "car," "toy," "ball," "treat," and "dinner" very well. Training sessions should last no longer than 15 minutes and can be repeated several times in one day. As with dogs that have normal hearing, deaf dogs can find training deeply rewarding and fun if it is done consistently, predictably, and with a good balance of persistence and rewards.
- Vibrating collars can also be used to obtain the pet's attention. This can awaken a pet, or if the pet is outside, can indicate that he or she is being "summoned." Currently available vibrating collars may be too heavy for puppies and small-breed dogs but appropriate for adult dogs.
- If a deaf puppy is "breaking a rule," such as chewing on a valuable object, you must interfere with the action immediately (laziness cannot be allowed). Since the dog cannot hear, you must firmly but gently stop the action by intervening so the pet can learn that the particular action is unacceptable. This means immediately removing the valuable object that is being chewed, for example. Here, consistency is especially important. Since the dog cannot be warned with verbal commands, reprimands involving direct, sustained eye contact (move to a position where the dog can see you, then scold) are essential. Dogs understand best when a consistent pattern emerges, so you should be sure to reprimand firmly but gently and consistently every time your dog does something you dislike, and be sure



Direct eye contact is essential for communicating either praise or reprimand to a deaf dog. Note the hand gesture, which can lead to training through sign language.

not to give up after the dog has repeated the bad behavior a few times.

- It can be useful to place a bell on your dog's collar. This will allow you to determine where your pet is, whether inside or outside the house.
- Treats are the best reward method to use to train your pet. Try carrots or other vegetables (for dogs, no onions) before using high-calorie treats. This can help prevent obesity later in your dog's life. Just as you would with a hearing dog, eventually switch from treats to hand signals (instead of words) to reward the dog. A thumbs-up or clapping with enthusiasm (and smiling) indicates a good job.

## AFTERWARDS

Most deaf pets will become desensitized to the sudden startle over time. Remember to always offer positive reinforcement for calm responses to surprises throughout the pet's life.

It may help to let your deaf dog know when you are leaving the room or leaving the house. Many dogs become frantic until they find their owners. This will also usually decrease over time, once a pet is comfortable with the environment, knowing the owner will be returning.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*Is my pet more susceptible to other diseases because it has congenital deafness?*

Just because a pet is deaf does not mean that any other health problems or concerns exist. Ask your veterinarian to perform a full physical exam to look for any other abnormalities.

*Can cleaning and medicating my dog's ear cause deafness?*

If your pet has an underlying ear infection or other abnormality, such as a ruptured eardrum, deafness may result from the use of inappropriate medications. Call your veterinarian prior to applying any medication.

*My deaf dog seems to become very anxious when I leave the house and chews everything in sight. What can be done?*

Dogs can experience separation anxiety which can result in abnormal behavior, and this could possibly be heightened by deafness. Provide your dog with a crate that is comfortable and large enough to move around inside. Provide positive reinforcement for your dog, reducing any anxiety that may be associated with crating. If your dog continues to exhibit abnormal behavior, call your veterinarian to discuss the potential for consultation with a veterinary behavioral specialist and/or use of appropriate medications.

Practice Stamp or Name & Address