

They suffer a different kind of conjunctivitis

Sudden redness of an eye can indicate a sight- or life-threatening disease

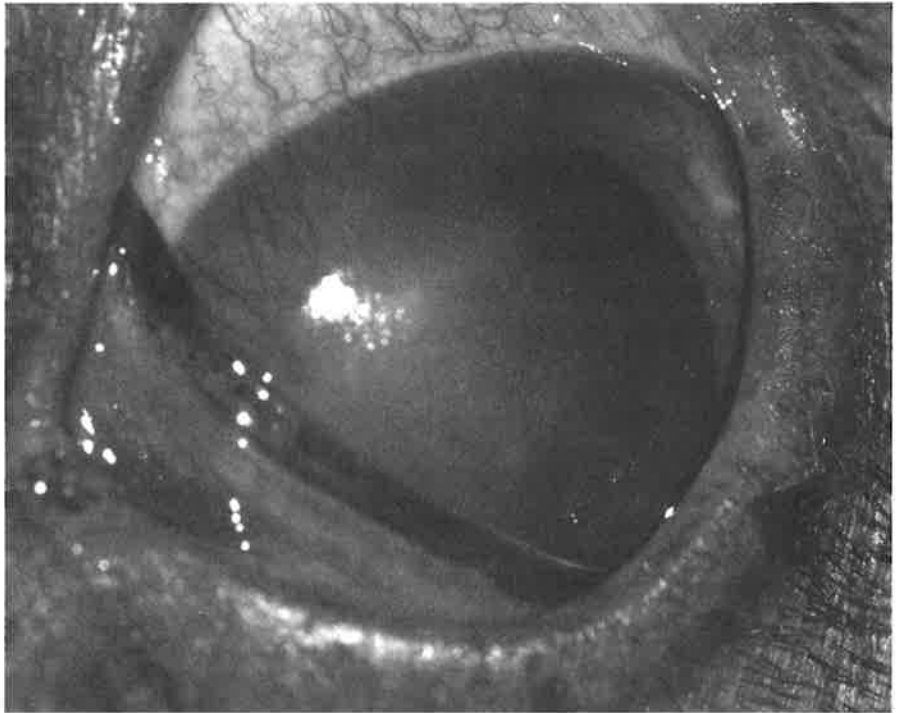
■ Your dog greets you in the morning, and you notice immediately that one of his eyes looks red and inflamed. When you pull back the upper eyelid, the normally whitish part is filled with engorged blood vessels. There may be watery or even thick, green to yellowish-white discharge accumulating on the inside corner of the eye.

You recall that when your own eyes become red and oozy, the culprit is usually a highly contagious but not particularly serious infection, easily remedied with antibiotic eye drops. Or you may assume that your dog is suffering from seasonal allergies.

Stop. Try to forget everything you know about eye problems in humans. When a dog's eye becomes inflamed, it's probably not conjunctivitis, the infection that affects human eyes, nor is it likely to be an allergic reaction. In dogs, conjunctivitis describes a type of inflammation associated with specific eye diseases.

Chances of success

Sudden redness of the eye can signal any number of conditions or diseases, and the sooner your dog has an ocular examination, the better his chances are for successful treatment. "Acute-onset redness in the eye can indicate there's something really serious going on," says ophthalmologist Isabel Jurk, DVM, at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University. "It may signal a painful and potentially sight-threatening eye condition. It could even indicate a life-threatening infectious disease or systemic disease like cancer. I would make an appointment with a veterinarian as quickly as possible."



This inflamed, swollen eye indicates conjunctivitis.

Dr. Jurk also advises that if you notice certain additional symptoms, you should consider it a true medical emergency. These include puffiness of the eye, tearing from the eye, squinting, cloudiness of the eye or change in its size. Note also whether the third eyelid, which normally sits at the inner corner of the eye, has extended across its surface. Most of these symptoms indicate pain, and in dogs, serious eye diseases are almost always painful.

Terah Robbin Webb, DVM, an ophthalmologist at MedVet, a specialty and emergency practice that treats 50,000 patients a year in Columbus, Ohio, says that red, inflamed eyes are the most frequent reason that dogs and their owners arrive at her office. "Most people come in thinking a simple eye infection is causing the prob-

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lem, but in dogs, that just isn't the case. A red eye is a clinical sign of another disease," she says.

Here, in somewhat simplified terms, are several of the most common ones or conditions to consider:

KCS (keratoconjunctivitis sicca), or dry eye, is a painful, debilitating condition in which the dog's eyes stop producing adequate amounts of lubricating tears. When this happens, the transparent covering of the eye — the cornea — becomes dry. Predisposed breeds include West Highland white terriers, bulldogs,



West Highland white terriers are predisposed to painful, debilitating dry eye, as are bulldogs, cocker spaniels and Lhasa apsos.

Additional symptoms constitute a true medical emergency.

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Uveitis is an inflammation of the uveal tract, which supplies blood to the eye. It's an indicator of other underlying conditions, including but not limited to systemic illnesses, severe infections and even cancer. Uveitis can be extremely painful.

Glaucoma is a disease in which fluid that would normally drain from the eye becomes trapped within the eye, causing pressure to build up. When the pressure reaches dangerous levels, it can result in complete, irreversible blindness. Beagles, basset hounds, cocker spaniels and Arctic Circle breeds such as Alaskan malamutes are predisposed to glaucoma.

A *corneal ulcer* is a wound on the surface of the eye. Whether the ulcer is deep or superficial, it can be quite painful. If left untreated, the ulcer may become infected, causing the eye itself to perforate.

Slightly red eyes after exertion aren't a big cause for concern

If both your dog's eyes appear only slightly red, you probably have no cause for concern. You may notice this change after prolonged physical exertion or if he becomes anxious or excited. A dog's eyes are full of blood vessels, and if his blood pressure rises, his eyes will appear a bit redder than normal. Note, however, that when this happens both eyes will be affected, there will be no indications of pain and — most importantly — the redness will disappear in an hour or two.

However, if you believe your dog has developed an eye problem, here's action to take while waiting to see the veterinarian:

- Keep the dog from pawing his eyes.
- If the eye looks dry, you may want to apply artificial tears. Two recommended brands are Refresh Celluvisc and Genteal. Both of these over-the-counter products are designed for humans; both are liquids, not ointments. Avoid ointments because if a perforating ulcer is present, the ointment can enter the eye and complicate surgical repair of the ulcer.
- If you see a discharge from the eye, use a warm, wet washcloth or tissue to remove it gently.
- When you make your initial call to the veterinarian's office, be prepared to describe the color and consistency of the discharge and other symptoms.

Entropion and ectropion are eyelid defects. If a dog's eyelid rolls inward — as in entropion — it can irritate and damage the cornea. Dogs with heavy facial folds, such as the Chinese sharpei and chow, are prone to this condition. Dogs with ectropion have loose, saggy eyelids. If the lower eyelid is loose enough, it forms a pocket in which debris and bacteria accumulate. Ectropion is prevalent in bloodhounds, St. Bernards and Newfoundlands.

Owners can do little to prevent most of these conditions, Dr. Jurk says. But if you're choosing a new dog, be aware of those genetically predisposed to eye diseases. "A lot of people think about joint disease, hip disease, heart disease but not so much about eye problems, which can be really profound in certain breeds," she says.

Breeders may choose to have their dog's eyes checked and registered an-

nually through a program called CERF, the Canine Eye Registry Foundation. It uses veterinary ophthalmologists to test purebred dogs to determine those free of heritable eye disease and suitable for breeding. For more information, contact cerf@vmdb.org.

Action, not prevention, is the key. "There are numerous cases that we see every year where owners think the redness and discharge are nothing," says Dr. Robbin Webb. "If it turns out to be glaucoma, for example, that's causing the red eye, and pressure within the eye builds up and remains high for 24 hours, it can cause irreparable damage. So by the time the owner brings the dog in and the problem is diagnosed, it's too late to save the vision in that eye, and sometimes, unfortunately, vision in both eyes is lost." ■

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