

Caring for a blind dog

Caring for a blind dog can have its challenges but it also can be incredibly rewarding. In this column I discuss visually impaired dogs at all levels; a dog may not be completely blind but still have a level of disability.

Firstly, regardless of their vision status, a dog is still a dog. If young, you can expect the dog to be playful, inquisitive and high energy. If older, which is the case for many dogs who lose their vision later in life, activity level may not be the biggest issue.

The senses of hearing, smell and touch are heightened in a visually-impaired dog. The same is true of people with visual impairments. This is a good thing for dogs because we all know that a dog's sense of smell is much more acute than that of a human; an older dog may not be able to rely as heavily on their sense of hearing as a younger dog, however.

A dog who has lost their vision, whether suddenly or gradually, will face the need to adapt to surroundings. Physical management of these dogs must always be top of mind.

The best way to start your management plan is to get down on all fours and crawl around your home like a dog. Look for hazards such as sharp edges on furniture and changes of floor height. Baby gates are a must if there are stairs that a dog can fall down because even a dog who has 'mapped' their surroundings can become distracted and forget where they are in relation to the stairs. Sharp edges can be covered in soft material to act as a bumper should the dog get too close.

The next issue in the home is floor management. I'm usually talking about slippery floors for arthritic dogs which is certainly an issue for an older and blind dog. For any vision-impaired dog, however, you can use different floor textures to help guide them. For example, a yoga mat might transition to the carpet to help signal to the dog that they are heading from one room to another. Sensory mats which are often used in play centres or for children with autism can also be used to signal specific points in the home. Rugs of different depths or materials can also be used.

It's best not to move furniture around the home because a dog



with limited vision quickly maps its surroundings. A home with a visually impaired dog should quickly adhere to the rule "a place for everything and everything in its place" to avoid collisions with items left on the floor and in walkways.

I always recommend a halo collar for all vision-impaired dogs (above) because they take the guesswork out of management. You'd be surprised how quickly a dog becomes accustomed to the halo, learning that when they feel pressure through the halo they should stop and change direction. Halos come in varying styles with some attached to a harness and others to a collar. You can find a style that works for both of you.

Collars, tags, leads and harnesses that state the dog is 'BLIND' (bottom left) are also essential tools. Should the blind dog become lost or loose, these items immediately signal to passersby that the dog needs special care.

If you are in a multi-dog household, you can attach a bell to the collar of your other dog(s) so that the blind dog will learn to follow its siblings. For the dog who is newer to blindness, adding a fountain-style water bowl will help guide them to their water dish because of the noise it makes.

A visually impaired dog can learn cues not needed in the sighted dog. I recently fostered Fred, a substantially blind two-year-old Greyhound. Fred had limited vision in his left eye and, from what I could learn of his history, he was visually impaired from birth. For Fred, I used the cues 'up up' and 'down down' for encountering kerbs and other changes in terrain. I also taught him 'this way' for generic management of direction so I could use it when I wanted him to move closer towards me to avoid an obstacle without necessarily needing him to do a full recall.

In Fred's case, he relied on his limited vision to some extent. Our concrete steps at our front door appeared to him to be just a 'hole' of grey and were initially a great source of anxiety when going out for walks. Adding tape across the stairs in a pattern arrangement helped him to learn the steps and following my other Greyhound, Sox, up and down also helped immensely.

As a young dog, Fred loved to play. Squeaky and other noise-making toys were his favourites because he could follow the sound without necessarily having to rely on his limited vision. Scent work can be another enriching activity for the visually impaired dog.

Blind and visually impaired dogs can enjoy life with good quality – it's up to us as caregivers to adjust our world for their safety and fun. 🐾

