

Living with a Disabled Pet

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Sometimes dogs or cats are born with a disability; others acquire a disability through disease, accident or old age. Regardless of the cause, with a few special considerations and a little extra care, disabled pets can live a full and enjoyable life. In fact, animals cope with disability far better than most humans do! Here are a few examples of some of the more common disabilities we see in our companion animals, many of which are really no disability at all.

Loss of a limb. The loss of a limb can seem quite extreme, but three-legged dogs and cats do quite well and, in time, they become as graceful and active as they were with four legs. As the remaining limbs become stronger, animals learn fairly quickly to walk and even run with three legs. Don't expect an amputee to be back to normal immediately, but it is surprising how fast they adapt – how quickly you'll see Fluffy back on the top shelf of the entertainment center and Fido wanting to chase the Frisbee again. Remember, they can't learn to get around again if you constantly carry them, so let them experiment. A few falls will help them regain their old coordination sooner.



Blindness. When blindness strikes, it can be quite sudden or it can slowly develop over time. If you think your dog or cat has gone blind or is going blind, a trip to the veterinarian is in order as soon as possible. Blindness can be caused by a variety of medical problems, not just those affecting the eye itself. Diabetes in dogs or kidney failure in cats can cause sudden blindness, as can cataracts or glaucoma. Diabetes and kidney failure are potentially life-threatening, so it's important to make an appointment with your vet right away. Also, a quick diagnosis and treatment can sometimes restore the animal's sight.

If the medical conditions have been dealt with and your pet has been determined to be permanently blind, you need to be aware that blind pets need time to adjust to their new limitations. Here are some guidelines:

- Do not approach and handle your pet without first announcing your approach. Gently use his name before trying to touch him, so he knows who you are.
- Blind cats may not like to be picked up. They lose their orientation and may become frightened. Pet and play with them on the floor, where they feel more secure.
- Limit changes in furniture arrangement and routines as much as possible. Place food and water bowls in familiar places that are easy to locate.

- If your pet has recently become blind, carefully monitor her food and water intake until you are sure she is able to manage on her own.

Deafness. Deafness can occur gradually, so you may not notice that Fluffy or Fido has been gradually losing hearing over time. You may notice a hearing deficit first by an unpleasant change in behavior – that is, your pet may strike out first and ask questions later. Because hearing acuity is difficult to assess in dogs and cats, it may not be possible to determine whether your pet is actually deaf, or has merely developed “selective hearing.” If you believe your pet is deaf, a veterinarian can check the ear canals for signs of infection or swelling, which may affect hearing. Remember, deaf pets cannot hear warning signs (car horns, barking dogs, etc.), so keep them indoors when they’re not closely attended.

Arthritis. Older pets can sometimes develop arthritis, which makes getting around a little more difficult. There are medications available from your veterinarian that can help with the pain and discomfort associated with arthritis. Another way that you can help is by making things around your house more accessible to your pet. You can construct simple ramps and steps to provide easier pathways up and down stairs. Be sure to carpet ramps and stairs so slipping is not a problem. If you have an arthritic cat, provide a litter box with shorter sides to make entry and exit easier.

With a little extra care, you can easily keep your disabled pet comfortable and happy. Keep in mind, though, that disabled pets still require some degree of independence. So, meet their needs, but let them be the cats and dogs that they are. Many are not aware of their disabilities, but most do appreciate a helping hand now and then!

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.

See also: [What Did You Say? \(All About Your Deaf Pet\)](#)
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