



SUDDEN ACQUIRED RETINAL DEGENERATION SYNDROME (SARDS)

What is SARDS?

SARDS, or Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome, results in sudden loss of vision that typically occurs over a period of days to weeks. SARDS most commonly occurs in middle aged female dogs, but can occur in any breed, age, or gender. In addition to loss of vision, many dogs with SARDS also develop increased thirst and urination.

What causes SARDS?

The cause of SARDS is not known at this time, but some potential causes include an immune-mediated process, release of an internal hormone that is toxic to the retina, or exposure to some other substance that rapidly destroys the retina.

How is SARDS diagnosed?

On ophthalmic examination, a dog with SARDS will typically be blind in both eyes, but will have a relatively normal-appearing retina. SARDS is definitively diagnosed by a test of retinal function called an electroretinogram, or ERG. In dogs with SARDS, the ERG waveform is extinguished, or flat line, because there is no measurable retinal function remaining.

Can SARDS be treated?

Unfortunately, there is no proven treatment for SARDS. However, a potential empiric therapy for dogs having a hard time adjusting to their vision loss, but not with the goal or benefit of vision restoration, is melatonin supplementation, which we have used for a handful of cases with mixed success.

Regardless of any therapeutic pursuit, for adjustment and management of the blindness, we recommend reading the book "Living with Blinds Dogs" by Caroline Levin at the website www.petcarebooks.com. This book is an excellent resource with information about various causes of vision loss in dogs, and with tips for considering the environment from a dog's perspective and making it safe. This author also has a companion book, "Blind Dog Stories" with heart-warming tales of how well blind dogs can do. We also recommend the internet as a valuable resource for information on visual impairment in animals and management of such, and support for owners of visually impaired animals. Some useful websites include: blinddogs.com, pepedog.com, angelvest.homestead.com, i-love-dogs.com/dog/rivers, mysticpup.net and doggles.com (protective eye ware for dogs; also recommended as a potential resource website for owners of blind dogs who may be more likely to damage their eyes at play if they bump into things as a result of their visual deficits).

What is the prognosis?

Although SARDS causes irreversible loss of vision, this condition is not painful, and with time most dogs adjust very well to being blind.

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