

THE APPLE OF MY EYE—NOPE, CHERRY EYE: The all-too-visible gland of the nictitans



Overview—“I don’t understand what Cherry Eye is; please help me understand the condition and the treatment.”

Dogs and cats have a 3rd eyelid, called the nictitans. It sweeps up from the inside, lower corner of the eyelids when they blink. In most animals, you can just see it resting in its “down” position when the eyelids are open. Within the body of that 3rd eyelid is a gland, called unimaginatively, the gland of the nictitans. It produces much of the mucus-type components of tear film that keeps the eyeballs moist and happy, so it is a necessary gland.

In some animals, best as we understand, likely related to breed and face structure (so, “genetic” to some extent), this gland bulges up and out of its resting position below the lower lip of the eye socket. It looks like a bright pink round structure, hence, the “cherry eye” name.

This condition is not painful exactly, more irritating. The surface lining of the bulging gland is the same as the lining of the eye socket; this “mucosa” is not used to being out in the air, so it gets inflamed and feels uncomfortable (like you have something in your eye or your eye is dry and sandy). When irritated like this, the mucosa produces a lot of mucus and inflammatory debris that shows up as weepy, crusty, mucus discharge from and around the eye. The surface cornea of the eye doesn’t like this chronic inflammation and can become unhealthy. The irritation causes the animal to squint and blink and rub/paw at the face a lot.

Treatment is a slick little procedure that involves tucking the gland into an “envelope” of its own mucosa that effectively puts it back down in its rightful place and allows it to keep doing its job making mucus for the tear film. In patients with very long-standing cherry eye, the cartilage that keeps the shape of the 3rd eyelid can become permanently folded. When this is the case, another surgical step is taken to correct this abnormal cartilage fold and improve the position of the 3rd eyelid after the gland is replaced.

“Why is this procedure being recommended for my pet?”

The cherry eye correction is recommended to improve eye health, comfort and appearance, and to prevent future eye problems with tear production (dry eye) and cornea health (ulcers).

“What options do I have to treat my pet’s condition (no treatment; conservative, medical, and surgical treatments)”

In some animals, the cherry eye condition is small and cosmetic only. If no inflammation, irritation, discomfort is noted, then correction may not be needed. The eye inflammation can also temporarily be treated with eye ointments to improve comfort and decrease irritation, but the gland usually does not go back into position spontaneously. In some animals, the gland will pop in and out for a while, and then stay out.

The surgical treatment is best achieved when severe inflammation has been reduced with eye ointments. It can be accomplished with other unrelated/necessary procedures under the same anesthetic episode to reduce patient stress and financial costs.

“What postoperative complications do I need to know and understand when considering this surgery?”

The two most common, although rare, complications are corneal irritation/ulceration from the eyeball surface (“cornea”) and recurrence of the bulging gland (likely from broken sutures and delayed healing of the incision).

If eye irritation develops in the first 1-2wks postoperatively, we may need to sedate your pet to fully evaluate where the irritation is coming from and remove the source. If the gland bulges anytime in the near or distant future, another anesthesia and surgery is needed to repair and reinforce the gland repositioning.

Protecting the eye during the first two weeks of recovery is helpful but not a guarantee toward a successful outcome. The E-collar (“cone”) is tiresome for both pet and owner, but absolutely essential for eye procedures to prevent self-trauma from rubbing and pawing the eye.

“Are there situations when the surgical outcome is not what we hoped it would be?”

As mentioned above, a gland that does not stay put is an undesired outcome. It happens sometimes—rarely, but when it is your pet, a frustrating outcome. A revision procedure of the original type is the likely first step toward addressing this recurrence; in cases that are troublesome and uncommon, we may resort to a different surgical technique or removal of the gland (both are less desirable, so are used in difficult cases only.)

“How is my pet’s life and lifestyle likely to change after this procedure?”

There are no major changes other than a more comfortable, quiet eye.

“Are there things I can do to prepare myself, my home and/or my pet for this procedure?”

Your pet’s eye(s) will be uncomfortable for a week or so; their vision might not be really good because of swelling, squinting, discharge and applied ointments. Plan to keep your pet in safe locations, with no access to unsupervised stairs; and away from “strangers” (i.e. no dog parks, free roaming, etc.)

An E-collar will be needed 24h/7d so plan accordingly to supervise your pet wearing this frustrating device; you may need to assist with eating/drinking, and you may need to adjust furniture to allow freedom of movement around the house.

Outpatient surgery and anesthesia can be uncomfortable, painful, disorienting, and frustrating experiences for animals; watching your pet work through the early postoperative period and recover from anesthesia and pain medications can be worrisome, scary and frustrating for pet owners. The vast majority of the time this period of difficulty is brief, and *your pet is actually more comfortable and secure at home with you*. Sometimes it doesn’t feel like that at two in the morning when your pet is anxious and not consolable, and you are unsure of what to do. You always have the option of transporting your pet to a 24-hour veterinary facility postoperatively. If you do not want to have your pet home in the first few days postoperatively, please advise your primary care veterinary staff. They will provide contact information for a local 24-hour veterinary facility and help get an estimate for the ongoing care.

It is important that you have proper expectations about this procedure; your experience and you pet’s outcome will benefit greatly. Please discuss this information with your veterinarian when working through the decision-making process regarding **Cherry Eye Correction**.

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