

## CHERRY EYE

(Prolapse of the gland of the third eyelid, or nictitans gland)

### What is cherry eye?

Domestic animals have upper and lower eyelids like we do, but they possess an additional structure that we do not, called a third eyelid (or nictitating membrane). This structure protects the globe by covering it when the animal blinks, fully or partially. It also acts like a windscreen wiper, spreading the tear film evenly across the eye in order to keep the cornea healthy. A very important gland is present at the base of the third eyelid, called the gland of the third eyelid or the nictitans gland. The gland produces up to 50% of the tear film, which is vital to the health of the surface of the eye. It is not normally visible as it is on the innermost surface of the third eyelid at its base, and is held in this position by a ligament.

Cherry eye is the term used when the gland is visible, usually looking like a pink, fleshy mass. Either weakness of its supporting ligament or excessive swelling can cause the gland to protrude, causing the third eyelid to invert (or 'flip over'). While this gland is protruding, it is not able to secrete the tears it makes, and the third eyelid is not able to perform its important 'window-wiper' function. If the gland is left like this for a long time, it becomes dried out, ulcerated and sore. It can also be permanently damaged if left out of position for too long, as scarring may result in the tear-secreting function being lost permanently.



### What about the other eye?

A large percentage of cases have a weakness in both third eyelid ligaments. Therefore your dog might already have Cherry Eye in both eyes. If not, your vet may opt to operate on the apparently normal eye at the same time, to reduce the likelihood of an extra general anaesthetic being required at a later date. However, each case is different, and the advice given to you will be tailored to suit your particular dog.



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## **How is a cherry eye repaired?**

Years ago, the gland would have been surgically removed. However, in the long-term, a significant proportion of these animals developed a condition called keratoconjunctivitis sicca (or 'Dry Eye'). This is a sore and potentially blinding condition which results from the surface of the eye being too dry from the lack of tears. This condition is expensive to treat as it requires life-long medication, and causes considerable discomfort to the animal.

Nowadays, we prefer to replace the gland in order that it can still produce tears. In some breeds, such as Neapolitan Bull Mastiffs and Weimaraner, there is a kinking problem in the cartilage of the third eyelid, and this may be repaired at the same time.

## **How is the surgery done?**

A general anaesthetic is required in order to operate around the eye. There is more than one technique that could be used in order to successfully do this, but the most common technique involves putting the gland back into place in a pocket of conjunctiva (the pink tissue around the eye) at the inner surface of the third eyelid. This is stitched securely into place and tucked back down into its correct position. The stitching material used absorbable, and therefore no stitches need to be removed afterwards.

## **What is the prognosis?**

When this procedure is done by a veterinarian skilled in the operation (such as a veterinary ophthalmologist), there is a high success rate of approximately 90%. Occasionally, days or weeks after the surgery, the gland manages to protrude again, in which case the surgery can be repeated.

Where there has been a delay in replacement, there is a risk of keratoconjunctivitis sicca developing in later life.

## **What does the animal look like after surgery?**

Immediately post surgery, the third eyelid still looks inflamed and red, but the third eyelid is no longer inverted or 'flipped-over' like it was. Once the gland is in the normal position, the swelling will slowly reduce over a period of usually two weeks. The eyes should be fully open and relatively comfortable. There may be a small amount of discharge from the eye which is grey or slightly brown, and this should be gently removed by cleaning twice daily.



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### **What aftercare is involved?**

Your animal will be discharged with an antibiotic ointment. This should be applied twice daily. Your animal should be kept quiet for ten days after the surgery. Lead walks should be avoided if the animal strains on the lead as pressure on the neck will encourage the gland to protrude again. Therefore a harness for walks may be a good investment. A buster collar will be provided to stop your dog from rubbing at the stitches, and should be left on twenty-four hours a day for ten days.

A post-surgery check-up is scheduled one to two weeks after surgery to assess your pet. However, if there are concerns before this, it is best that you would telephone us or your own vet straight away.