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SUDDEN ACQUIRED RETINAL DEGENERATION (SARD)

What is SARD?

SARD is a condition affecting dogs in which a rapid onset of blindness occurs. Vision loss is noticed when the dog starts bumping into objects, and is more noticeable away from familiar territory or when objects are moved within the home. The retina is the layer lining the inside of the back of the eye. This layer receives light, and processes it using rods and cones into an electrical signal which can be sent to the brain in order for the brain to 'see'. If this layer stops working, the eye no longer sends any messages to the brain, so vision is lost.

What causes SARD?

The cause is not known. Some dogs have a disease called Cushings syndrome (hyperadrenocorticism) and some show signs of drinking and urinating more frequently in the preceding weeks. There may be some changes detected using blood tests, particularly to the white blood cells and to the liver.

What are the signs of SARD?

The condition usually affects middle-aged to older dogs. Any breed of dog can be affected, but more female dogs are affected than male dogs, and more obese dogs are affected than thin dogs.

Blindness develops rather suddenly, sometimes overnight, or in a matter of days. The pupils are usually dilated (large and dark).

How is SARD diagnosed?

The typical clinical signs will lead your vet to a suspicion of SARD. You will usually be referred to rule out other causes of blindness, which can be more easily picked up on examination. It is very important to rule out other conditions as some of these have serious consequences for the animal and may need specific treatment. Early on in the course of disease, the eye with SARD looks normal. Your veterinary ophthalmologist may then recommend that your dog have a test of retinal function called an electroretinogram (ERG). This sophisticated test gives a tracing of the electrical activity of the retina, and a flat-line trace confirms that the retina is no longer functional.

Blood tests are usually carried out also.

How is SARD treated?

Unfortunately there is no proven treatment for SARD. The condition is poorly understood as the animals always present after the event has happened, and there is no indication what was happening within the eyes in the days and weeks prior to the sudden blindness. The retina is unable to regenerate.

While there is no treatment available, the condition does not cause pain. Time is required for your dog to adapt to blindness and for you to adapt to the new lifestyle.