



Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome (SARDS) in Dogs

What is Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome (SARDS)?

Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome, or SARDS, causes sudden blindness in dogs, usually in both eyes. It occurs because the retina, the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye, suddenly stops functioning. Early on, the eyes may still look relatively normal, even though vision has already been lost. Over the following weeks, retinal changes become more obvious on examination, and the pupils are dilated. SARDS is not painful.

What signs might I notice?

The most obvious sign is sudden loss of vision. Dogs may start bumping into objects, seem disoriented, hesitate in unfamiliar places, or become reluctant in dim light or outdoors.

The pupils are often dilated and may respond poorly to light.

Many dogs also develop other changes around the same time, including:

- increased appetite
- weight gain, mainly a pot-belly
- increased thirst and urination

These signs can resemble hormonal disease, especially Cushing's syndrome, although most dogs with SARDS do not actually have Cushing's disease.

What causes SARDS?

The exact cause of SARDS is still not fully understood. An autoimmune or neuroendocrine process is suspected, but no single cause has been confirmed. What is clear is that retinal function is lost very quickly, leading to sudden and usually permanent blindness.

How is SARDS diagnosed?

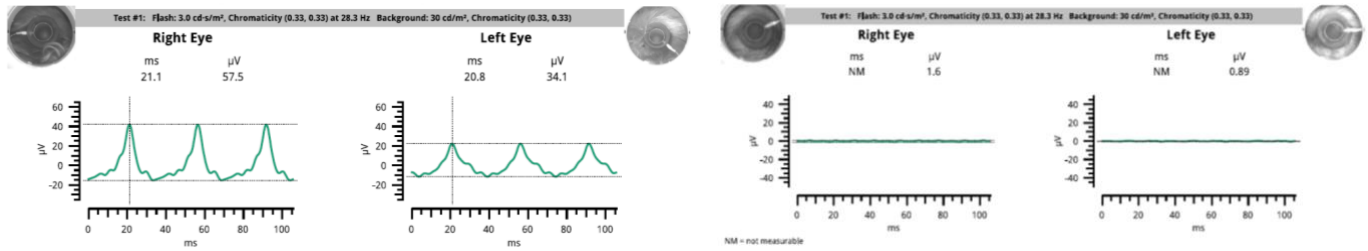
Diagnosis is based on the history, the ophthalmic examination, and, in most cases, an electroretinogram, or ERG. Blood tests are often recommended through your own vet as well, to look for other health problems and to assess for conditions that may cause similar systemic signs.

An electroretinogram, or ERG, measures the electrical activity of the retina in response to light. In dogs with SARDS, the ERG confirms that the retina is no longer functioning, even when the inside of the eye may still look fairly normal in the early stages. In most cases, this is the most useful test for confirming the diagnosis.



Performing an electroretinogram





Normal ERG

ERG from a dog with SARDS

Is there any treatment for SARDS?

At present, there is no treatment that has been reliably shown to restore vision in dogs with SARDS. Management therefore focuses on confirming the diagnosis, checking for any concurrent health problems, and helping your dog adapt safely to blindness.

Living with a dog with SARDS

Although the diagnosis is understandably upsetting, many dogs adapt better than owners expect. Dogs rely heavily on smell, hearing, routine, and memory, and many quickly regain confidence at home. Many dogs continue to enjoy walks, company, play, and normal family life after they have gone blind.

Helpful measures include:

- keeping furniture and household layout as consistent as possible
- avoiding clutter and obstacles at floor level
- using a lead in unfamiliar places, ideally with a harness
- approaching your dog with your voice so they are not startled
- supervising around stairs, swimming pools, balconies, and open drops
- keeping feeding, walking, and sleeping routines predictable

What is the outlook?

Vision loss from SARDS is permanent. However, the condition is not painful, and many dogs adapt well and continue to enjoy a good quality of life with sensible support and adjustment.

What happens next?

Your own vet may recommend blood tests or other investigations to assess your dog's general health and any associated hormonal-type changes. If needed, we are happy to recheck your dog, discuss the diagnosis further, and advise on practical ways to help them adapt. If you have any concerns about your dog's vision, quality of life, or adjustment to blindness, please contact your own vet or Eye Vet for advice.

