

# Living with a Deaf Dog

A lot of the same things that cause hearing loss in humans also cause hearing loss in dogs. Dogs can be born deaf (congenital deafness) or can become deaf because of some injury, disease, drug, toxin, or simply as a result of aging (acquired deafness).

The most common cause of congenital deafness is related to the amount of pigment (coloring) that the dog has. The proper development of the hearing mechanism depends partly on the development of pigment in certain cells of the inner ear. If there is no pigment development (as seen in dogs who are white), these cells do not function properly and the animal may be deaf. A white animal with blue eyes is more likely to be deaf than a white animal who has gold, green, or brown eyes.

Acquired deafness can happen after an injury to the head or ear canal. Certain drugs can also cause deafness. Even chronic ear infections can eventually cause deafness.



It may be difficult to determine whether or not your dog is deaf. A dog who doesn't respond to being called or to other noises may be deaf, or he may just have "selective hearing," meaning that he hears when he chooses to do so! Older animals may experience a gradual loss of hearing as part of the aging process. The only sure way to know if your dog is deaf is to have a Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response (BAER) test done. Unfortunately, this test is available only at veterinary schools or large referral hospitals.

If you believe that your dog is deaf, start with a complete health checkup by your veterinarian. After receiving a clean bill of health, you can work with your deaf friend to teach him or her how to recognize basic cues.

Dogs who are deaf can lead long, healthy, happy lives. If you're patient with training, they can be taught to respond to cues as well as any hearing dog. In terms of learning principles, deaf dogs are trained just like dogs with normal hearing. The biggest difference lies in how we get their attention, and what type of cues we use to ask for a behavior. Teaching a deaf dog to respond reliably to the "come" cue when she's not on leash is probably the biggest challenge. The simplest solution is to keep her on a long leash rather than wonder how to get her to look at you when she is 50 yards away and looking at a rabbit.

Indoors, stomping your foot on the floor will create vibrations that can signal your dog. If the dog is off-leash in a fenced yard at night, try using a flashlight. Laser pointers also work well at night and sometimes even in daylight. (Caution: NEVER shine a laser pointer anywhere near your dog's head, as it can cause eye damage. Point the laser at the ground or on an object in front of your dog.) You can also train your dog to come to you

in response to a flashing light: You can flick your porch light off and on when your dog is outdoors at night; indoors, you can use the room lights. If you're gadget-oriented, you might want to buy a remote-controlled vibrating collar, which creates a sensation similar to that of a cell phone or an electric toothbrush.

To teach most behaviors, such as sit, down and stay, the techniques of capturing or luring work equally well for deaf dogs and dogs with good hearing. In some situations, in fact, deafness is an advantage because deaf dogs are less susceptible to random distracting noises during training. Instead of using a verbal cue ("sit," "stay"), you'll use a visual marker, such as a hand signal. Dogs are actually more naturally disposed to respond to visual cues. (It is humans who like to put words to things.)

A few more points worth mentioning:

- Although verbal praise may not be a meaningful reinforcer for a deaf dog, you are not limited to food as a reward. Physical contact like petting or other playful interactions can be highly desired rewards for any dog.
- The loss of hearing associated with normal aging occurs gradually and in stages. The few studies done show that hearing is lost first in the middle- to high-frequency range of sounds, with the hearing loss for low-frequency sounds coming later. Therefore, your dog will be able to hear you when you speak in a low-pitched voice for a longer period of time than when you use a normal or high-pitched voice. Sometimes, whistles (sports or dog whistles, or using your own mouth) will work for certain partially deaf dogs.
- Because hearing-impaired dogs can't hear approaching cars, always pay extremely close attention to your dog whenever you and he are near a street or road.

Finally, two excellent resources for people who have deaf dogs are the Deaf Dog Education Action Fund website at [www.deafdogs.org](http://www.deafdogs.org) and the book *Living with a Deaf Dog* by Susan Cope Becker.