

Special Needs: The Inspiring Lives of Disabled Cats

Cats with disabilities can live long, happy lives, and surprise their owners with their resilience.

Don Vaughan

Sudden blindness can result from traumatic injury, but more often disease takes away the vision of cats by degrees. Unfortunately, cats often hide their diminishing vision from their owners until their eyesight is all but gone. According to Munger, common indicators of progressive feline vision loss include increased vocalization, greater caution when moving around a room, bumping into furniture and misjudgments when jumping onto or off of favorite perches.

Cat owners should regularly monitor their pets vision by checking their pupils light response, Munger said. When you shine a light in a cats eye, the pupil should constrict. If the light reflex is abnormal, then the animal may have a problem and should be evaluated by a veterinarian. If caught early enough, the problem may be something we can treat.

Cats adapt to blindness by relying on memory and their other senses, but this adjustment can take time and owners should be supportive and patient. Realize that just like people, the cat that goes blind is going to find itself having to cope with issues that its not used to, such as navigating around the house, Crowell-Davis said. Some of the things we can do to help are common sense, such as not rearranging the furniture every day.

Its also a good idea to move through your house at the cats level and see what needs to be done in the way of cat-proofing. Sharp table edges, decorative metal work or low, protruding objects can all pose a hazard to a blind cat and should be cushioned or removed for the animals safety. Baby supply stores carry a variety of products, such as table pads, that can be used to protect cats with disabilities.

A cat that suddenly can't see will understandably be timid as it learns to adapt to its situation. Cats that are extremely fearful may benefit from a few weeks of anti-anxiety medication, Crowell-Davis said. An owner can also encourage her pet to walk around by leaving a trail of favorite treats for the cat to follow. Over passing days, place the treats farther and farther apart. Once the cat learns that it can walk around safely, it will steadily build up its self-confidence.

The Hearing-ImpairedAs with blindness, many cases of deafness are the result of a congenital defect. For example, many blue-eyed, white cats are born deaf, said J. Veronika Kiklevich, DVM, clinical instructor and veterinary practitioner at Washington State University Veterinary Hospital. Other common causes include traumatic injury and severe, untreated ear infections.