

Veterinarians: Dogs, too, can experience hearing loss

March 5 2020, by Diana Yates



Veterinary neurologist Dr. Kari Foss greets a Dalmatian puppy that needs his hearing tested. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Just like humans, dogs are sometimes born with impaired hearing or experience hearing loss as a result of disease, inflammation, aging or

exposure to noise. Dog owners and K-9 handlers ought to keep this in mind when adopting or caring for dogs, and when bringing them into noisy environments, says Dr. Kari Foss, a veterinary neurologist and professor of veterinary clinical medicine at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In a new report in the journal *Topics in Companion Animal Medicine*, Foss and her colleagues describe cases of [hearing loss](#) in three working dogs: a gundog, a [sniffer dog](#) and a police dog. One of the three had [permanent hearing loss](#), one responded to treatment and the third did not return to the facility where it was originally diagnosed for follow-up care.

The [case studies](#) demonstrate that those who work with police or hunting dogs "should be aware of a dog's proximity to gunfire and potentially consider hearing protection," Foss said. Several types of hearing protection for dogs are available commercially.

Just as in humans, [loud noises](#) can harm the delicate structures of a dog's middle and inner ear.

"Most commonly, noise-induced hearing loss results from damage to the hair cells in the cochlea that vibrate in response to sound waves," Foss said. "However, extreme noise may also damage the eardrum and the small bones within the inner ear, called the ossicles."

Pet owners or dog handlers tend to notice when an animal stops responding to sounds or commands. However, it is easy to miss the signs, especially in dogs with one or more canine companions, Foss said.

"In puppies with [congenital deafness](#), signs may not be noticed until the puppy is removed from the litter," she said.

Signs of hearing loss in dogs include failing to respond when called, sleeping through sounds that normally would rouse them, startling at loud noises that previously didn't bother them, barking excessively or making unusual vocal sounds, Foss said. Dogs with deafness in one ear might respond to commands but could have difficulty locating the source of a sound.

If [pet owners](#) think their pet is experiencing hearing loss, they should have the animal assessed by a veterinarian, Foss said. Hearing loss that stems from ear infections, inflammation or polyps in the middle ear can be treated and, in many cases, resolved.

Hearing-impaired or deaf dogs may miss clues about potential threats in their surroundings, Foss said.

"They are vulnerable to undetected dangers such as motor vehicles or predators and therefore should be monitored when outside," she said.

If the hearing loss is permanent, [dog owners](#) can find ways to adapt, Foss said.

"Owners can use eye contact, facial expressions and hand signals to communicate with their pets," she said. "Treats, toy rewards and affection will keep dogs interested in their training." Blinking lights can be used to signal a pet to come inside.

Hearing loss does not appear to affect dogs' quality of life, Foss said.

"A dog with congenital hearing loss grows up completely unaware that they are any different from other [dogs](#)," she said. "Dogs that lose their hearing later in life may be more acutely aware of their hearing loss, but they adapt quite well. A dog's life would be significantly more affected by the loss of smell than by a loss of hearing."

More information: Danielle C. Schneider et al, Noise-Induced Hearing Loss in 3 Working Dogs, *Topics in Companion Animal Medicine* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tcam.2019.100362](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tcam.2019.100362)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Veterinarians: Dogs, too, can experience hearing loss (2020, March 5) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-03-veterinarians-dogs-loss.html>

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