

Canine Hearing Loss Management

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KEYWORDS

- Hearing loss management • Canine hearing loss • Sign language • Vibrotactile
- Hearing loss prevention • Hearing aid amplification

KEY POINTS

- Consider whether canine hearing loss has social and emotional parallels to human hearing loss.

Regardless of whether these parallels exist, we must also consider the following:

- If hearing loss has a direct impact on owner's interactions with the hearing-impaired dog and how communication can be enhanced.
- Whether any safety concerns might arise for the animal or its humans because of diminished hearing.
- And whether there are any recommendations that the veterinarian might share with the dog owner or handler to help mitigate the impact of any existing hearing loss.

INTRODUCTION

Is it possible that dog owners project their fears of personal hearing loss onto their pets? The thought of developing a hearing loss is indeed frightening for many people. Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind, once noted that her loss of hearing was far more disconcerting than her loss of sight. As she stated, her blindness separated her from the things in her life that she enjoyed, but it was her hearing loss that separated her from the people in her life that she loved.

Very quickly after a dog enters one's home, either as a family pet (or dare we say family member) or as a working partner, a close bond develops in which the owner/handler wishes only the best for his or her companion. When this loved animal develops a hearing loss, or is suspected to have and subsequently confirmed to have a congenital deafness, it is only natural for owners to project onto their canine companion their

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own fears of hearing loss and the perceived impact such loss would have on the life of the dog.

Importance of the Sense of Hearing versus the Sense of Smell

As we discuss the impact of hearing loss on dogs, we need to keep in mind that dogs rely on their sense of smell more heavily than their sense of hearing. Humans have about 6 million receptors for scent, whereas dogs, depending on breed, can have up to 300 million!¹

Whereas humans often judge on appearance, dogs assess by scent.² Not only can they identify a stranger by scent, but they can smell if a new dog acquaintance is male or female, mature or not, if a female is ready to breed, if she is nursing pups, if there is a health problem, and some of the animal's mood. From a human perspective it might be somewhat disconcerting if everyone met on the street could tell that much about us by just being nearby.

A dog's daily life would be affected much more by the loss of smell than by the loss of hearing. Dogs follow scent trails to find potential prey (as anyone who has had to chase a beagle through dark woods is sorely aware), find their toys, and navigate the house (as blind dogs quickly learn how to do). Using an olfactory sense that is a million more times acute than a human's,³ they learn about other dogs' states of being by sniffing where they urinated, and then add their own scent to the mix creating a type of newspaper for the next dog that comes along. They can smell when a door in the house has opened, alerting to the new scents from outdoors, to arrive in time to go for a run, and they can smell out sources of food from great distances. They have even been trained to detect fingerprints on glass six weeks after the glass was touched.²

Dogs are so adept at using their sense of smell, that they have been trained as sensors to detect bladder cancer in humans by smelling urine samples, detecting the cancer before any current noninvasive laboratory test is able.⁴ They can find microscopic traces of drugs left behind on money, and recently have been trained to find single bed bugs in a building. They are commonly used in searches for missing people and in combat to sniff out explosives and insurgents. Their sense of hearing takes a back seat to the value of the sense of smell in their lives.

Keeping this in mind, owners should not project their own despair at their dog's hearing loss and remind themselves that their dog has other ways to compensate. It is the communication with the owner that suffers most, and that is where owners should concentrate their efforts. For most dogs, a hearing loss can be taken somewhat in stride. On the other hand, for some highly trained dogs who are accustomed to a variety of vocal commands, a hearing loss can be frustrating or cause them to retire early from a career they enjoy.

HEARING LOSS IN CANINES: ARE THERE IMPACT PARALLELS WITH HUMANS?

Before looking at the types of hearing loss, one must question if canine hearing loss has social and emotional parallels to those of humans. Significant permanent hearing loss in humans has a direct impact on academic achievement, vocational success, earned income, social interactions, and family dynamics.^{5,6} Studies have further shown that untreated adult human hearing loss is associated with overall poorer health, decreased physical activity, psychosocial dysfunction, and depression.^{7,8}

Given the substantial negative impact that hearing loss has within our species, it is understandable that many dog owners become quite concerned when their beloved pet shows signs of diminished hearing. But a legitimate question might be: Does

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