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Corneal Ulcers

There are times when our pets are not the most graceful creatures. They may run into sticks or bushes, fall off the couch, or play with their housemates too roughly. Every so often, our pets can do something that causes them to scratch their cornea. This newsletter goes over corneal ulcers: what they are, what they look like, and a few treatment options available.

I Spy with My Little Eye...

The cornea is a clear covering that is at the very front of the eye. The cornea's main job is to protect the rest of the eye from outside dangers, such as dust, hair, trauma, etc. If there is too much trauma to the cornea, however, it can result in a corneal ulcer. A corneal ulcer is a scratch or lesion on the cornea. The most common cause of a corneal ulcer in dogs is due to trauma, whereas in cats, the most common cause is due to a herpesvirus infection (which is also a leading factor of upper respiratory infections).

There are several layers to the cornea. A superficial corneal ulcer is where the trauma is just affecting the outer layer of the cornea. A deep corneal ulcer is where the lesion penetrates through multiple layers of the cornea, typically with only a thin membrane left protecting the eye. Some ulcers, whether due to trauma or infection, can cause perforation into the eye, causing the intraocular fluid to leak out through the cornea. This is an emergency situation, and if not treated quickly, the pet may lose his/her eye.

To diagnose a corneal ulcer, a fluorescein eye stain test is performed. This highlights different areas of the cornea to help show if a lesion on the cornea is present, as well as how deep the ulcer is and how large of a surface area it covers.

Treating Corneal Ulcers

Treatment of corneal ulcers depends on how deep the ulcer is, as well as the initial cause. A standard corneal ulcer that does not perforate through the entire cornea is often treated with antibiotics (to keep the ulcer from becoming infected) as well as pain medications to keep the patient more comfortable. An e-collar is sent home as well to prevent the pet from scratching the eye with their paw or to keep them from rubbing it on the carpeting, sofa, or other surrounding objects. For deeper corneal ulcers, other methods of treatment may be needed, and referral to a veterinary ophthalmologist may be ideal. For ulcers that are either too infected or are beyond repair, enucleation, or removal of the eye, is likely the next step. It is important to note that many dogs and cats only have one eye, and this does not stop them from living out their normal lives!



Best regards,
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