Tear Stains in Dogs & Cats

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Q. Why does my dog have brownish stains on the insides of his eyes?

A. On many lightcolored dogs, especially miniature and toy breeds, we may see a brown or pink stain on the skin and hair below the inside corner of the eye. We can also see these tear stains in cats, most commonly in Persians. In both dogs and cats, this is a common cosmetic problem caused by an overflow of tears onto the cheeks. The color change of the hair and skin occurs when the normal bacteria on the hair and skin react with the clear tears.

In normal animals, tears are constantly produced and drain out through small ducts in the eyelids. The ducts empty into the nose. (That is why your nose runs when you cry.) In animals with blocked ducts, the tears overflow the lids and run down the face.

There are several causes of the overflow of tears. Miniature breeds and Persians often have more prominent eyes. This stretches the eyelid and may cut off the drainage system. This is the most common cause and there is little we can do to correct it. Some animals are born with an abnormal drainage system that may or may not be surgically correctable. Sometimes, the eyelids turn inward and block the drainage. This is also surgically correctable.

Hair can act like a wick, drawing the tears out of the eye. This can be corrected by removing the offending hair. In some cases, tear overflow may be due to excessive tear formation caused by irritation of the eye by a particle of something in the eye, an allergy, or an abnormal eyelid or eyelash which turns inward and rubs against the surface of the eye. Inflammation or ulcers of the surface of the eye (cornea), or inflammation of the duct system is also a cause. These conditions, which are often painful, need to be seen immediately by your veterinarian.

Since the tear accumulation on the facial hair can also lead to matting of the hair, skin irritation and possible infection, you must keep this area clean. Trimming the hair below the eye will help. Clean the area and remove any accumulated material or crusts. If a skin lesion is seen, clip the hair closer, and after cleaning the area it may help to apply an antibiotic ointment; it is best to use an ophthalmic (eye) antibiotic ointment on skin this close to the eye. If the lesion is large, deep, or ulcerated, or if you have any question about the severity of the lesion, you should see your veterinarian. More severe cases may require oral antibiotics and other treatment measures.

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There are products available which are used to remove the brown stain from the hair. These products can be irritating to the eye. They should NOT be used directly in the eye. If necessary, to protect the eye, apply an ophthalmic ointment to the eye prior to using these products.

To help maintain healthy eyes in your pet, check the eyes on a regular basis, keep the area around them clean, and when in the car, roll the window high enough to prevent your pet from getting his head out of the window. Because your pet's eyes are so important, consult your veterinarian if you suspect any type of eye infection or problem.

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