

Love Is Deaf



FAQs About
Deaf Dogs and Cats



Best Friends
ANIMAL SOCIETY®

FAQs About Deaf Cats

Most cats are resilient and adapt to deafness. Your gentle care and loving attention will go a long way in helping your deaf cat adjust to life without sound.

What causes deafness in cats?

Some cats are born deaf or are genetically predisposed to deafness. Chronic ear infections can cause deafness, and some drugs are toxic to the nerves associated with hearing. Age-related deafness is the most common cause. It can develop rapidly or gradually when the tiny bones of the middle ear lose their flexibility to vibrate and transmit sound. Hearing loss can be accelerated by damage from loud noises. Chronic ear infections and ear mites may also result in hearing loss.

In what ways are deaf cats different from hearing cats?

Deaf cats compensate for their hearing loss by relying more on their other senses. They tend to watch people and other pets more closely, and take cues from their people's behavior. Deaf pets also pay closer attention to vibrations and air currents. For example, the breeze made by a door opening may cue a deaf pet that someone has arrived. Some deaf cats meow more often and more loudly, because they cannot regulate their "volume," while others become mute.

How do I communicate with my deaf cat?

There are many different ways to communicate without sound. You can simply wave at your cat to get his or her attention, or flip a light on and off. At close range, sharp hand claps might provide enough vibration in the air to get your cat's attention. Pointing a flashlight or pen light in the direction of the cat and turning it on and off can do the trick, too, especially if the flashing light is followed by a tasty incentive. You can also use a laser light, but be careful not to shine it in the cat's eyes. Another method: Throw a small ball or soft toy into your cat's line of sight. Before you do something to get your deaf cat's attention, consider whether the action will frighten your pet.

At feeding time, flick an overhead light on and off two or three times and/or tap your toes on the floor to call the cat. Your cat can feel the vibrations if he is relatively close. It may not be necessary to alert your cat that it's mealtime, however, because many cats have an "internal clock" that tells them it's time to eat.

To awaken your cat, walk over to him and lightly tap the ground. The cat will feel the vibrations and wake up in a calm way. You can also gently pat the surface where your cat is sleeping or flick the lights. It's best not to touch the cat to get him to wake up because it could startle him and result in biting or scratching.

Try to develop a consistent communication method, so your cat knows what to expect. To show your affection, use loving touch or the "I love you" slow blink, and your cat will get the message.

Can I train my deaf cat?

Deaf cats can be trained using the basic premise of clicker training, but instead of a clicker sound, you can use a flashlight or a flash from a camera to mark the desired response. Some deaf cats learn to respond to hand signals similar to those used in distance control of dogs.

TIPS FOR ADOPTERS OF DEAF CATS

To keep your deaf cat happy and safe:

- Use identification: Microchip your cat and have her wear an ID tag with "deaf cat" noted on it.
- Attach a Cat Locator pendant to the cat's collar. The pendant emits a tone when the handheld applicator is activated, to help you find your deaf cat. Also, the vibration from the tone can be used as a training signal to curb undesirable behaviors.
- Never let a deaf cat outside unsupervised. The cat will not be able to hear traffic or other perils, and won't have the necessary reaction time to avoid dangerous situations.
- If you want your cat to spend time outdoors, teach him to walk with a harness and leash, or construct a cattery to enable your cat to enjoy the outdoors safely.
- If you take your cat on walks outdoors, it's a good idea to write "I am deaf" on the cat's collar, harness or bandana to alert people when they are approaching him.
- If you feel that your cat is lonely, consider adopting another pet. You'll want to carefully screen any new pet, of course, to make sure this new friend is gentle and will be a good companion for your deaf cat.
- Alert your cat to your comings and goings by touching him gently (if he's not sleeping, that is) when you enter or leave a room.
- Touch or pet your cat when you are talking, so that your cat will feel the vibration of your hand as you speak.
- Make time every day to pet, cuddle and play with your cat. Hearing-impaired cats need company. The warmth of your hands is soothing to them in a silent world.
- Offer your cat a variety of toys. Deaf cats have other senses — touch, smell, taste and vision — that can be engaged. Be creative.
- To curb excessive meowing, try placing a small, gently vibrating dog collar under the cat's bed pillow (not around the cat's neck). The vibrations of the collar can have a calming effect.

FAQs About Deaf Dogs

Deaf dogs make wonderful pets and family members. People who have deaf dogs say it's not that much different from having a dog who can hear. They simply communicate with their dogs using signs and body language instead of words.

What causes deafness in dogs?

In dogs, deafness is caused by many of the same things that cause hearing loss in humans. Genetic defects can cause a dog to be born deaf; congenital deafness in dogs is commonly related to certain pigmentation patterns. Dogs can also lose their hearing as a result of an ear infection or injury to the ear, or they may experience gradual (or sudden) hearing loss due to old age. Exposure to loud noise can cause temporary or permanent hearing loss, as can certain drugs.

Does it take a special type of person to adopt a deaf dog?

Many different types of people take deaf dogs into their homes and families. Experience with deafness isn't necessary. Love and commitment to the adopted pet are the most important things.

Is a deaf dog a good pet for a family with children?

If a deaf dog is well socialized to children, the dog is as safe to have in a home with children as any other dog. Consider all the same factors you would if you were to adopt a hearing dog, such as size, age, history, personality, behavior and activity level.

How do I communicate with my deaf dog?

Deaf dogs can be taught to respond to hand signals instead of human speech. Many people use signs adapted from American Sign Language to cue their deaf dogs, or they develop their own signs. The hand signals must be clear, distinguishable from other signs, visible at a distance, and used consistently.

Learning to respond to signs or hand signals is very easy for dogs because they are very adept at interpreting body language and facial expressions. In fact, this is often how they communicate with each other. Try to use your voice when you are signing so that your body language and facial expressions will be more natural.

The dog you adopt may already know some signals or signs. Ask the shelter or rescue group from which you adopt the dog if the previous owner offered any information about this.

How do I get my dog's attention?

There are a number of ways: Thump on the floor with your hand or foot to cause vibrations; wave your hand around in front of the dog; toss a lightweight toy into the dog's line of sight; flick a flashlight or pen light on

and off. You can also use a laser light, but be careful not to shine it in the dog's eyes. When you're out on walks, jiggle the leash to get your dog to look at you. To cue the dog that it's time to come in from the backyard at night, flick the porch light on and off or shine a flashlight into the yard.

Another option is to use a gently vibrating collar (not a shock collar), but please read the directions carefully. Some dogs will respond fine to the collar, while others have no response or are afraid of it. Before you do something to get your deaf dog's attention, consider whether the action will frighten your pet.

If your dog is sleeping and you need to awaken him, always touch him gently in the same place; the shoulder area may work best. You can also try putting your hand in front of his nose and letting your smell wake him up. Every time you wake him, give him a treat and some love. Getting a deaf dog out of sleep can be disconcerting for him, so the treat will make waking up an enjoyable experience.

Will a deaf dog require more of a time commitment?

Deaf dogs, just like hearing dogs, require time, patience and energy devoted to training and socialization to help them become well-adjusted and well-mannered. As with any dog, it's important to develop a trusting relationship and build the dog's confidence through positive interactions. Because your hands will be the primary tool that you use for communication, take care to always use your hands in a positive way.

Are deaf dogs hard to train?

Most people find that it is no more difficult than training a hearing dog. As mentioned above, dogs learn to respond to hand signals quite easily. Well-trained deaf dogs make eye contact with their people on a regular basis, repeatedly checking in.

Deaf dogs can be trained using the basic premise of clicker training, but instead of a clicker sound, you can use a flick of a pen light or a hand signal, such as a thumbs-up sign, to mark the desired response. A positive reinforcement method such as clicker training lets your dog have fun while learning and also encourages the development of a trusting relationship with you.

How safe is a deaf dog off-leash?

It's generally not safe to allow a deaf dog off-leash in an unfenced area, especially in a place that's close to traffic. Most people who have deaf dogs don't let them roam off-leash in an open area.

Can a deaf dog be my only pet or is a hearing companion pet needed?

Deaf dogs do not need a hearing companion as a guide. The personality of the individual dog will determine whether another pet in your home is desirable. If your deaf dog is amenable, however, a furry friend with great dog skills can be a wonderful mentor.

How do other dogs react to a deaf dog?

One of the challenges of living with deaf dogs is managing them around other dogs, who often misread the deaf dog as being socially inept because he or she doesn't respond "normally" to canine vocal cues. To keep your deaf dog safe around other animals, you'll need to establish a "heads-up" prompt to alert your dog when other dogs are approaching. You should also watch each dog's body language for signs of discomfort, fear or aggression. On the flip side, dogs with great social skills can help deaf dogs to learn and practice similar skills.

Are there any special considerations when adopting a deaf puppy?

If you adopt a deaf puppy, you will need to focus on bite inhibition as soon as possible. Mouthing is a natural dog behavior, but deaf puppies are unable to hear the squeal from an animal or human that lets them know that they are biting too hard. So, you should develop a sign for "be gentle" and redirect your puppy's attention to a toy when rough play occurs. Supply a variety of toys and appropriate items to chew. Also, adult dogs with good social skills can be a big help because they will use their body language to teach a puppy good manners.

TIPS FOR ADOPTERS OF DEAF DOGS

To keep your deaf dog safe and happy:

- Use identification: Microchip your dog and have him wear an ID tag with "deaf dog" noted on it.
- Use a GPS tracker collar on your dog, especially if you're traveling.
- Always keep your dog on a leash when you're out walking. It's a good idea to write "I am deaf" on the dog's collar, harness or bandana to alert people when they are approaching him.
- Attach a bell to your dog's collar for easy tracking if she escapes or becomes lost.
- Allow your dog to be off-leash only when you're in an enclosed area.
- Train your dog to be comfortable in a crate; it can be very useful in behavior management and training.
- If your dog gets anxious when she doesn't know where you are, get her attention when you're about to leave the room and allow her to watch you leave. She may or may not decide to join you, but at least she'll know where you went.
- Always approach a deaf dog in a gentle way to avoid startling her.
- As with any dog, a deaf dog needs socialization, so take your dog for walks in a variety of environments: parks, city streets, the country.
- Enlist help from friends, family or neighbors to help socialize your dog. Before allowing them to approach or touch her, make sure your dog is aware that new people are present.
- A "watch me" signal or physical cue, such as a light tap on the shoulder, is a great way to teach the dog to focus on you. Also, treat your dog frequently and at random times to encourage and reinforce her desire to always be checking in with you.

For more about caring for and training pets, go to bestfriends.org/resources/pet-care

Adopt a special-needs pet. The life you'll save is priceless.

