

DISTICHIASIS

Distichiasis is a condition where eyelashes emerge from a structure in the eyelid (Meibomian gland) which does not normally produce hairs. These “extra” eyelashes often rub on the surface of the eye and may cause irritation. Distichiasis tends to run in genetic lines of dogs, and is most commonly found in retrievers, spaniels, and poodles.

The severity of the problem and the need for treatment vary from patient to patient. Some patients may have only a few distichia (abnormal hairs) on a single eyelid, while others may have several distichia present on many eyelids. Although some patients live their entire lives without being bothered by their distichia, others require medical or surgical treatment to alleviate irritation caused by the hairs rubbing on the cornea.

Signs that your pet may be bothered by the distichia include redness, squinting, discharge, or rubbing at the eye. Sometimes distichiasis can cause corneal ulcers or erosions where the hairs touch the surface of the eye. Clinical signs of corneal ulcers are similar to those of distichiasis- redness, squinting, discharge, or rubbing at the eye. Since corneal ulcers can also occur in patients that have no distichia, it can sometimes make determining the significance of the distichiasis difficult. The location of the ulcer and the distichia help us decide whether the distichia are the underlying cause of the ulcer.

Temporary relief may be provided by pulling out the abnormal hair in the exam room, but these lashes usually grow back within a few weeks. Topical ointments may be used to help lubricate the eye and protect it from the hair. If clinical signs persist, cryosurgery can be used to treat distichiasis. Cryosurgery is the local application of extreme cold in order to kill tissues. Normal eyelid structures are relatively resistant to injury by freezing; however, hair follicles are quite sensitive to freezing. After eyelid cryosurgery, the surgery site will be swollen for 10-14 days, and within 2 weeks will turn pink due to loss of melanin-producing cells. You may also notice whitening of the hairs surrounding the surgery site. In most cases, the skin will repigment within 4 months, but the hair whitening may be permanent. Keep in mind that new distichia can grow in other places on the eyelid(s) and cause problems, requiring additional cryosurgery.