



## Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome (SARDS) in Dogs

### What is Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome (SARDS)?

**SARDS** is a condition that causes rapid, unexplained sudden vision loss in dogs. It is a form of retinal degeneration that typically affects both eyes simultaneously, leading to complete blindness.

### Signs and Symptoms of SARDS

The primary symptom of SARDS is **sudden blindness**, but other signs may appear first, including:

- **Increased appetite and weight gain:** Many (but not all) dogs with SARDS experience a sudden increase in hunger (polyphagia) and may gain weight as a result.
- **Excessive thirst and urination (polydipsia and polyuria):** Some dogs may drink more water and urinate more frequently due to hormonal changes associated with the condition.
- **Changes in behavior:** Your dog may seem more withdrawn, less active, or reluctant to go for walks due to difficulty navigating their environment.
- **Dilated pupils:** The pupils may appear unusually large and may not respond normally to light.
- **Retinal changes:** You may notice abnormal changes to the retina during an eye exam, such as thinning or degeneration. This develops several weeks after the initial onset of blindness.

It is important to note that while the vision loss in SARDS is rapid, **it does not cause pain.**

### Causes of SARDS

The exact cause of SARDS remains unclear, but an autoimmune or neuroendocrine process is suspected. This means that the dog's immune system mistakenly attacks the retina; and endocrine issues, particularly related to **Cushing's disease** (hyperadrenocorticism), can contribute. However, not many dogs with SARDS have Cushing's disease, although they have similar physical symptoms.

### Diagnosis of SARDS

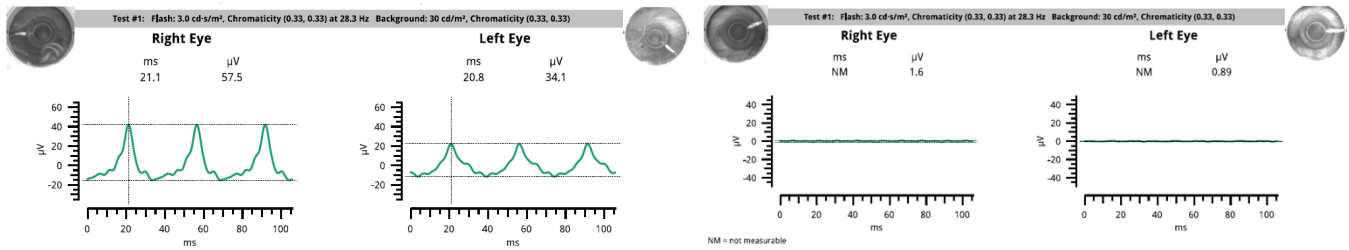
Diagnosing SARDS can be challenging and your vet will likely refer you to a veterinary ophthalmologist who can offer the following:

1. **Eye Examination:** A thorough eye exam will be conducted to assess the retina. Signs of retinal degeneration, such as thinning of the retina or lack of response to light, develop weeks after blindness develops.
2. **Electroretinogram (ERG):** This test measures the electrical activity of the retina in response to light and can help confirm the complete loss of retinal function. It is very diagnostic.
3. **Blood Test recommendations:** Blood work may be done at your own vets to rule out other causes of blindness and check for any underlying health issues, such as **Cushing's disease** or diabetes.
4. **Physical Exam:** Your vet will examine your dog for any signs of systemic illness or underlying conditions that could contribute to SARDS.



Performing an electroretinogram





Example of a normal electroretinogram (ERG)

Example of a patient with SARDS

## Treatment Options for SARDS

Unfortunately, there is currently **no cure** for SARDS and vision loss is permanent. We focus on managing symptoms, improving your dog's quality of life, and addressing any underlying health concerns that may be contributing to the condition.

### 1. Managing Vision Loss:

- **Adaptation:** Although the vision loss is permanent, many dogs adapt remarkably well to blindness by relying more on their other senses, such as smell and hearing. Maintain a consistent routine to make them feel more secure.
- **Environmental modifications:** Making adjustments at home, like keeping furniture in the same place and using scent markers to help your dog navigate, can ease their adaptation.
- **Training:** Engage your dog in games that rely on their other senses, like scent trails or sound-based games.
- **Provide extra care and attention:** Offer comfort and reassurance to your dog as they adjust. Their behavior may change, and they may be more dependent on you for guidance.

### 2. Treating Underlying Conditions:

- If your dog has an underlying condition such as Cushing's disease or diabetes, treating these issues may help manage some of the secondary symptoms associated with SARDS. Medications or dietary adjustments may be needed for these conditions.

### 3. Monitoring Health:

- Regular veterinary check-ups are important to monitor your dog's overall health and ensure that any related conditions, like Cushing's disease or hormonal imbalances, are being effectively managed.

## Living with SARDS

It is important to understand that while vision loss is irreversible, dogs can often adapt well to their new circumstances. Most dogs with SARDS learn to navigate their environment using their other senses and can live full, happy lives, although they may need extra support.

