You know how important your eyes are to you, so you probably realize how important they are to your cat. However, many cats are taken to the veterinarian with an eye problem too late and end up having impaired vision or complete loss of vision. Most of those cases of vision loss could have been prevented simply by knowing what normal eyes look like and seeing your veterinarian as soon as anything abnormal appears.

In addition to protecting your cat from losing his eyesight, there is another reason to be alert to changes in your cat’s eyes. Changes in the eyes can indicate illnesses in other parts of the body that need attention.

The Appearance of Normal Cat Eyes

Normal cat eyes are wide open and clear with no appearance of redness. The pupils, the black centers, should be equal in size and get smaller in bright light and larger in lower light. The exception would be large pupils when your cat is very scared or when taking certain medications. The iris, the colored area around the pupil, should be uniform in color without any unusual discoloration, especially brown spots. The cornea, the front surface of the eye, should be clear without any blood vessels running across it. You should be able to easily see through the cornea to the iris and the pupils.

The tissue around the eyeball lining the upper and lower lids should be pale pink and not swollen. You should not be able to see the third eyelids, a whitish membrane, in the inner corners of the eyes. The should be no tearing or discharge of any kind coming from the eye.

If you notice your cat’s eyes look differently from the normal eye appearance just described, it is time to see the veterinarian. In particular, watch out for squinting, redness of any part of the eye, a discharge coming from the eye, a buildup of crusty material in the corners of the eye, excessive tearing, tear-stained fur, a visible third eyelid, a difference in the size of a pupil when compared to the other one, very large pupils that will not get smaller in very bright light, a change in the color of any part of the iris, or cloudiness.

Common Eye Conditions

If your cat’s eye is red, there are several different conditions that could be the cause depending on which part of the eye is red.

Conjunctivitis, feline pink eye, is the term used to indicate inflammation of the tissue around the eye, the
conunctiva. This area lines the upper and lower eyelids. It will become red and possibly swollen when your cat has conjunctivitis. This is common among cats and can be caused by decreased tear production, trauma, bacteria, viruses, environmental irritation, or eyelid deformities. The most common cause is a virus and the most common virus is the herpes virus.

Herpes virus can also lead to ulcers on the front surface of the eye, the cornea. This will appear as fine red lines on the cornea or can be a larger, even more serious ulcer. This is a serious condition, especially in young kittens. Symptoms of herpes, in addition to conjunctivitis discharge from the eye, cloudiness, and scarring of the cornea.

If the white part of the eye, the sclera, is red, it could accompany conjunctivitis, but it could also indicate glaucoma. This is a condition where there is increased pressure in the eye. The cornea will also become cloudy and the eye will become enlarged. This is an emergency.

Feline Anterior Uveitis is the name for inflammation inside the eye. When you look at your cat, you are looking into the anterior, or front, chamber. You cannot see the posterior chamber, which is the area behind the lens. Inflammation in the anterior chamber will appear as a cloudiness, either generalized or in the form of particles and can be accompanied by red, swollen and runny eyes.

Feline anterior uveitis is treatable unless there is an underlying cause that is not treatable. Such underlying causes can include feline leukemia, feline infectious peritonitis (FIP), or toxoplasmosis. An underlying cause for approximately half of the cases of anterior uveitis in cats is never found. These cats are likely to have a full recovery, but may from time to time have a recurrence.

A teary eye can be normal if the discharge is clear fluid and the tearing is temporary. Cats can get dust or other foreign materials in their eyes just as we do, which can lead to temporarily producing more tears. Many cats have this condition permanently as the result of having one or both tear ducts blocked. This usually occurs following an upper respiratory infection and will not affect your cat's vision or life span. This can also be the result of an overproduction of tears.

Once the clear tears are deposited on the fur beneath the eyes, it may appear brownish or reddish in color. This is not blood. It is simply what happens when normal bacteria on the fur degrade the tears.

Sunken eyes occurs most commonly with dehydration, weight loss or aging. Weight loss most often indicates a problem, unless it was done intentionally, and your cat should be examined by a vet.

A bulging eye can be from trauma, an abscess or even tumor. Your cat should be seen at once if you notice a bulging eye.

If there is a change in the coloring of the iris, it can indicate melanoma, a form of cancer. It is most often seen as brown spots on the colored part of the eye. Not all new brown spots are melanomas, but your veterinarian needs to examine your cat if darker pigment spots begin to appear.

Horner’s Syndrome in cats is an eye condition that is caused by damage to the sympathetic nervous system in the eyes, ears, or neck. Trauma, eye diseases, middle ear problems, or tumors in the brain, chest or neck can cause this damage. This is characterized by a drooping eyelid, a red protruding third eyelid, a
constricted (small) pupil, and a sunken appearance to the eye(s).

When the third eyelid of a cat can be seen, something is wrong in the eye or elsewhere in the body. **Horner's Syndrome is not the only cause.** Your veterinarian needs to examine your cat right away.

A cloudy appearing eye can be the result of an inflamed, ulcerated, or scarred cornea, or you may be seeing cataracts.

**Retinal disease** occurs in the back of the eye where the retina is located. This is an area you cannot see, but can be examined by the vet with special equipment. This can be very serious and lead to blindness, and is one of the many reasons your cat needs regular visits to the veterinarian.

**Treatment of Eye Problems in Cats**

Treatment of eye conditions depends, of course, on the problem. Some diseases need antibiotic drops or ointment, while some need steroid drops. Others need anti-viral drops and some require oral medications as well. Conditions such as cataracts and glaucoma may require a type of surgical procedure. **It all depends on the particular condition and only your veterinarian will know which treatment is required.**

While your vet can examine, diagnose, and treat eye diseases, **this process begins with you. Again, you need to know what a normal eye looks like in order to recognize the abnormal.**

Anytime you notice something abnormal, **see your vet right away. Time is extremely important when it comes to saving your cat's eyesight.**

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