The gland inside of a dog’s third eyelid is held in place by little tissue fibers. Some dogs have weaker fibers than others, and that is why the gland can end up “prolapsing” or slipping forward, out of place, creating what’s called “cherry eye.” When the eye is not in its appropriate anatomic place, blood doesn’t circulate appropriately, and proper tear production cannot function normally.

The normal function of the third eyelid is to raise up to cover the eye in a diagonal direction when your dog blinks. The eyelid also contains a gland called the lacrimal gland. This gland is responsible for a good deal of the production of the water portion of tears. There is also another gland above the eye that has the same function. If you take away almost half of the water in the tears, then your dog can end up getting “dry eye.”

Many breeds are prone to getting cherry eye, and it’s thought to be based on genetics. A lot of this issue is seen in brachycephalic (flat-nosed) breeds, but it can also occur in breeds such as cocker spaniels, beagles and bloodhounds.

It’s important to know that prolapse of the lacrimal gland can occur bilaterally or unilaterally—meaning in one eye or both. If only one eye is affected, there is a very high risk the other eye’s gland will eventually prolapse as well.

Treatment for this condition includes surgical intervention to replace the gland back to its original state. One surgical technique is called pocket imbrication and involves creating a new pocket in the tissue of the third eyelid for the gland to be housed. There will be inflammation after the operation that will take a couple weeks to completely resolve, so surgical results won’t become fully evident until weeks out.

There’s another technique, called an orbital rim tack, where the gland is actually sutured to the tissues surrounding the orbital bone, but even these surgeries run the risk of failure and, at times, a second or third procedure is warranted. All of the results from surgery will also depend on the chronic nature of cherry eye or how inflamed or irritated the eye tissue is.

The removal of the lacrimal gland used to be a common practice, but now it is not an acceptable form of treatment and may cause further problems down the road. If the gland is completely removed, a little less than half of the water production for tears goes with it.

When this happens, the eye will try to compensate for the lack of water in the tears and make the only things it can for lubrication: mucus and oil. This is why you’d see a lot of yellow-green mucus-y discharge. Lifelong treatment will be needed because without the gland, secondary ulcerations or abrasions can occur, which can lead to blindness. Depending on how bad the injury gets to the cornea, removing the eye may be recommended for patient comfort, especially if the pet is blind in that eye.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking cherry eye is a cosmetic problem! The health of your dog’s eye is worth talking with your veterinarian about.