Managing Inherited Cataracts in Dogs

A Practical Guide for Labrador Retriever Breeders

Prepared by: Eldin A. Leighton, PhD with grateful AI assistance from Claude Sonnet 4.6.

June 2026

This guide helps Labrador Retriever breeders decide whether to use a dog, its offspring, or its siblings for breeding when cataracts appear in the pedigree. It distills the key decision points into plain language.

Key Points for Breeders

- **Canine cataracts are thought to be polygenic.** No simple DNA test can quantify a dog's genetic risk; decisions must rely on clinical exams and pedigree history. Estimated breeding values (EBVs), which combine a dog's own results with its relatives' across the pedigree, offer a more informative risk estimate than any single exam.
- **There are two general types: inherited and non-inherited.** The inherited form is what breeders aim to avoid perpetuating. The non-inherited form is more often caused by aging, trauma, or other environmental factors, and carries no breeding implication.
- **Every prospective breeding dog should be examined by a board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist.** An informal assessment or a non-specialist exam is not sufficient for breeding decisions.
- **A dog diagnosed with an inherited cataract should not be used for breeding,** and should be retired going forward if it has already produced litters.
- **Offspring of an affected parent face increased cataract risk,** though not every puppy will be affected, and an affected dog can often still work faithfully for years.
- **Offspring of an affected parent can still be considered for breeding if individually cleared** by a board-certified ophthalmologist.
- **A full sibling of an affected dog is not automatically excluded from breeding,** provided that sibling is independently examined and certified normal by a specialist.

A Simple Decision Framework

1. Has this dog been examined by a board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist?
2. If yes, were its eyes certified normal?
3. If a parent or full sibling has a diagnosed inherited cataract, has *this dog* nonetheless been independently examined and cleared?

A dog without a specialist exam should not be assumed clear based on appearance alone, and a dog with an affected relative should not be automatically excluded from breeding if independently cleared.

A Note on Genetic Risk

A clear eye exam does not rule out genetic risk entirely — it only means no clinical evidence was found at that time. Many programs therefore weigh cataract history across several generations, not just the individual dog and its immediate relatives. This is where EBVs add

the most value, since they summarize risk across a pedigree rather than from one exam. An accurate EBV, however, requires sufficient examination data across enough related dogs; one built on sparse data is no more informative than a single exam.

For a plain-language summary of the peer-reviewed literature behind these recommendations — including prevalence data, the distinction between primary hereditary cataracts and cataracts secondary to conditions like progressive retinal atrophy, and ACVO Genetics Committee breeding guidance — see *Genetic Inheritance of Cataracts in Labrador Retrievers: A Practical Summary of the Peer-Reviewed Literature*, by Eldin A. Leighton, PhD.