

Ask A Vet: Do Storms Have Your Dog Tucking His Tail?

Sunday, June 5, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldys,

My 4 year old Border Collie has shown extreme fear of thunderstorms this spring. We did notice this to some degree last summer, but last week during the storms she became so terrified she chewed halfway through a wooden door and dug the carpet to shreds in an attempt to escape our bedroom. We cannot afford that type of destruction. What can be done? Please help!!

Dear Reader,

You are experiencing what is probably the most common canine behavioral issue that I deal with as a veterinarian. Every spring and summer our clinic fields dozens of calls about dogs working themselves into a panic or even destroying property over the fear of thunderstorms. No one knows for sure what triggers the intense fear. Most experts feel it is related to the low frequency sound of rumbling thunder. Other causes are thought to be changing barometric pressure, static electricity, and wind associated with the storms. Most dogs seem to sense the storms well ahead of time, often showing uneasy behavior or pacing before we are even aware of any changes outside. I have seen dogs develop it suddenly as young to middle aged dogs or even in their geriatric years for seemingly no reason. Dogs that suffer from separation anxiety or fear of strangers are definitely more prone to this behavior, but I have also seen outgoing dogs affected as well. As with most behavioral disorders, there is not one easy fix for this issue, but rather several methods best used in combination.

Teaching your dog some simple commands can be a good start in controlling storm phobia. Work on these and perfect them when there is no storm around. Then when a storm is present use the commands as a distraction. The idea is that your dog will focus on you and the familiarity of the obedience work instead of the storm. Reward calm behavior with treats or attention. Try not to reward nervous behavior by holding or reassuring your dog. The same idea holds true with a favorite toy or Frisbee. Playing with this might provide comfort and actually turn the storm into a positive situation. Remember, most animals find comfort in routine so stick to what the dog knows and is used to during these times.

Another important tip is to allow your dog to go where it feels the safest. This might be a crate, basement, or interior room in the house. Try not to enclose it anywhere if you don't have to. This often leads to the destructive behavior as the dog feels like it must escape.

Recently, there has been an increase in the use of snug garments such as the Thundershirt or Storm Defender. They are simply garments for your dog that fit tightly around their torso. They are supposed to have a similar effect to swaddling a baby and make the dog naturally feel safer and more comfortable. Admittedly, the idea seems a bit far fetched, but I have heard dozens of positive reports from dog owners on the use of these types of garments.

Lastly, there are many situations where your dog may require supplements or even prescription medications to help deal with this anxiety. It is best to use these in combination with behavior modifying techniques. Consult your veterinarian on what might be the best approach to this common problem.

-Dr. Justin Sellon