

Ask A Vet: Firework Phobias Create Misery for Some Pets

Sunday, July 5, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog hates the last couple weeks of June leading up to the 4th of July because he is terrified of fireworks. What can be done to calm him down and alleviate his stress?

Dear Reader,

You are certainly not alone in this problem as firework phobias are a very common this time of year. My own dog suffers from this and it amazes me just how severe the phobia can be. Some dogs will do anything to escape the perceived threat the booming sound fireworks create. This is why it is one of the busiest days of the year for most shelters as the number of stray/loose dogs will skyrocket. Dogs will chew through kennels, dig under fences, pull out of collars/leashes, and sometimes simply run away from home to get away from the noise. Indoors dogs will hide behind couches or under beds, and in severe cases may attempt to chew through doors or walls if they feel trapped. Some may also inappropriately urinate or defecate in the house due to their stress. Unfortunately like many behavioral issues, there is not once simple fix, and dealing with this issue requires patience and understanding.

In general I recommend trying behavior modification first. Essentially this involves turning the firework experience into a positive one with high reward treats like peanut butter or whatever your dog's favorite treats are. This will take time and may not work for more severe phobias. If your dog simply wants to hide, that is ok, trying to this will only worsen the anxiety. Your dog will probably do better if your are home, but if you must be gone, think ahead and keep them in the quietest and safest room possible that they are already used to. Take your dog out on a leash if he is prone to bolting and running away when scared. Also, make sure he has some form of identification just in case, with microchips being the most foolproof.

Other remedies include medications, herbal supplements, and anxiety reducing wraps or shirts. Thundershirts are a snug fitting wrap around garment that tends to reduce anxiety almost immediately. Ear muffs may also work if your dog tolerates them. Composure is an all natural supplement that may work well in some dogs as a calming agent. All of these are great alternatives to medications if they work for your dog. However, in many cases, prescription medications must be used to have enough calming effect. These may range from anti-anxiety medications to mild tranquilizers depending on the severity of your dogs phobia. Talk with your veterinarian well in advance to see what medication options are out there for your pet. It is also a good idea to do a trial run with the meds so you know just how your pet is going to react as these may affect different patients differently. Hopefully, with a little knowledge and patience you can keep your firework phobia pet calm and safe during this part of the summer.

-Dr. Justin Sellon