

Ask A Vet: Pooch is Thunderstruck

Sunday, August 10, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog gets extremely agitated by storms and if left unattended, he will destroy the house. I don't want to get rid of him but I can't afford to be replacing couches or screen doors.

-Frustrated

Dear Frustrated,

Anxiety associated with thunderstorms and fireworks is a pretty common behavioral disorder in dogs. With pop up storms, it is sometimes very difficult to predict how or when to treat your animal. There are multiple ways in which you can handle this phobia or fear. One of the best ways is to desensitize your pet before the season for thunderstorms occur. You can find CDs at your local stores that sell music and play thunderstorm noises or soothing music at a low volume to get them used to it. You would gradually increase the volume as they get used to the sound. You will want to incorporate a "happy activity" like playing, brushing them, or feeding special treats.

A second option is to distract them or provide a comfort zone for them. You can pick a place in the house like a bathroom or closet without windows that is already set up with a comfy blanket or toy. You can put a radio or TV in the area to distract them from the noise. Kong toys that are stuffed with special treats or biscuits or peanut butter is a great distraction. Some dogs will respond very well to the "thunder shirts" that is a snug fitting vest that adds comforting pressure around the dog and this is based on human research done with kids with autism where the snugness relaxes them and slows down their breathing. In addition, there are aromatherapy DAP diffusers that can be plugged in that emits dog appeasing pheromones (hence DAP) or collars that also impregnated with DAP that last up to 4 weeks. A third way of relieving anxiety is to NOT reinforce the behavior. This means ignore the animal instead of coddling them. Continue with your daily activities and continue to speak in a playful voice as to not tip them off. A fourth way is to use drugs. We like to use the other methods first or at least a combination of all of the above. We are trying to modify the behavior and train the dog to work through the anxiety. Dogs will pick up on storms well before humans and so medicines should be started at least 2 weeks before storm seasons start. A baseline blood panel done by your veterinarian is generally required before beginning any long term therapy. Finally, diet of your pet should be reviewed by your veterinarian. There has been some research that mother's milk containing milk proteins may have a calming effect. There are some foods that have tryptophan and B3 added to diets also have stress minimizing effects.

With corporation from the family members and consultation with your veterinarian, your pet can be helped successfully to resolve or control their anxiety. Your veterinarian can help you form a strategic plan to address this important issue.

-Dr. Wanda Schmeltz