Fear of Fireworks

Author: Becky Lundgren, DVM

Summer is full of celebrations involving fireworks. Canada has Canada Day on July 1, the USA has Independence Day on July 4, and France has Bastille Day on July 14. Dogs and cats react to fireworks as individuals. Some aren’t upset by the explosions, and others get hurt by panicking and jumping through closed windows or bolting through doors to get away from the terrifying noise and lights.

American pet advocacy groups point out that the number of escapes is so high that Independence Day is the busiest day of the year in shelters — and that many pets get lost, injured, or killed. You should know which clinics or emergency hospitals will be open during fireworks season, in case you need one, as this will help you avoid time delays and stress.

Your pets do better if they’re not left home alone during fireworks events. That’s not always feasible, so think ahead before leaving them alone.

Signs of anxiety can include pacing, trembling, panting, drooling, attention-seeking (vocalizing, pawing, nuzzling, and climbing on people), hiding, and bolting. Escape attempts tend to involve hiding behind furniture, and staying in a basement or bathroom. Because the source of the noise is confusing, inside dogs may want to escape to the outside, and outside dogs may be frantic to get inside.

Nervous pets tend to drink more water, so keep more available than usual. And remember, these summer events usually mean hotter weather, and the likelihood of power problems, so extra water is already a good idea. Bring outside pets inside, so they can’t bolt. Keep your cats securely inside, and if your dog needs a potty break during the fireworks, take him outside on a leash, even in a fenced yard. Make sure all your pets are wearing an ID tag or a collar that contains your phone number. Tags and collars can be lost, so a microchip is even more useful in helping you find your lost pet.

Drug-Free Remedies

What can you do to keep your frightened pet safe and calm? For many frightened pets, just staying in a crate (as long as they are used to one) or in a "safe" room with a closed door is all that’s needed.

Classical counter conditioning distance from the fireworks can be less intimidating, as would be keeping the dog indoors. Music may disguise the bursts of noise; consider loud music with a regular beat.

You can teach a desirable coping response. The appropriate response for a dog facing something frightening is to retreat to a safe place until the frightening thing ends. Providing a safe retreat, such as a crate or a closet, will give security and confidence, although selecting the location is up to the pet. Blankets to muffle the sound and a pheromone diffuser will provide natural motivation for the dog to seek this location. Being able to cope when the world becomes overwhelming is a life skill essential for both people and dogs! Hiding is not a sign of a problem, if the pet quickly returns to a normal behavior when the fireworks are over.

Medication

It’s easier to prevent a fearful reaction than it is to reverse one. If your pet is nervous around loud, unexpected noises, a short-term sedative before the fireworks start may be just the ticket. Talk to your veterinarian ahead of time, so you can have something on hand to give your pet before the fireworks start. Some medications often used for fireworks or thunderstorm phobias in dogs are clomipramine or fluoxetine, and the feline version is in chews.

Some severely anxious pets may benefit from drugs like valium and clonazepam or fluoxetine that increase the level of serotonin. However, these drugs can take several weeks, if not more, to build up to an effective level, so this is not a spur-of-the-moment fix.

You have many choices of how to help your pet cope with fireworks stress. Talk to your veterinarian about what is best for your pet. Hopefully, everyone in the family will then be able enjoy the holiday!

Date Published: 6/23/2010 2:29:00 PM
Date Reviewed/Revised: 6/16/2014

Copyright 2014 - 2015 by the Veterinary Information Network, Inc. All rights reserved.

This article is also available to your clients on our veterinary client site, Veterinary Partner at http://www.VeterinaryPartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&A=3105. If you’d like to send the article to a client just open the article (click the above link and click Email article).