

Ask A Vet: Thunder Troubles

Sunday, August 31, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog hates thunderstorms. He paces and shakes, whines and tries to hide every time it storms, sometimes before the storm even starts. How do I help him?

Dear Reader,

Thunderstorm phobia in dogs is real, not uncommon, and shouldn't be ignored. Most dogs don't grow out of the phobia and many get worse with time.

Triggers for storm phobia aren't known, but some suspect the dogs are set off by some combination of wind, thunder, lightning, barometric pressure changes, static electricity, and low-frequency rumbles preceding a storm that humans can't hear.

Unfortunately, there's no easy fix, and unless your dog is only mildly affected, it can be difficult to treat. But there are lots of tools to reduce your dog's distress during storm season.

First, don't encourage the panicky behavior by consoling your dog. Petting and soothing rewards his fear. Certainly, don't scold or discipline him. Instead, practice getting your dog to settle on command. During calm days, put a special "inside" leash on him and practice having him lie at your feet while praising calm behavior. When it storms, he will still know to lie calmly at your feet.

Also, try distraction – a favorite toy, playing games, or a training session. As long as your dog remains calm, these can help replace fear with a positive experience.

Give your dog access to somewhere he feels safe. That might be an open crate, a basement where your dog can't hear or see what's happening outside, an interior room with music playing, or a bathroom. Let him decide: Notice where he goes during a storm, and try allow access to it. Be sure your dog can come and go freely, since some animals become more anxious if confined.

Though benefits are anecdotal, snug-fitting shirts and wraps especially designed to calm anxious dogs are worth a try. The Thundershirt and Anxiety Wrap, so-called pressure garments, are said to have a calming effect similar to swaddling a baby. Some dogs also respond to wearing a metal fabric-lined cape, called Storm Defender, which claims to protect dogs from static shocks.

Another tool is desensitization. Play a CD of thunder at low levels that don't frighten your dog, while giving him treats or playing a game. Gradually increase the volume over several months, stopping if your dog shows any signs of anxiety. The goal is to get your dog used to the sound of thunder, and associate it with good things. Desensitization can have limited success in an actual storm since you can only recreate the noise, and not other factors that may be bothering the dog, such as static electricity or pressure changes.

If your dog is severely anxious, ask your veterinarian about anti-anxiety medications. Depending on fear levels, you may keep your dog on medication for the whole season, or you may only give the medicine in the morning if there's a chance of a storm later. Medication works best when combined with behavior modification and desensitization.

-Dr. Teresa Alessandri