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Firework Phobias

Summer is full of celebrations involving fireworks. 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 escapees is so high that Independence Day is the busiest day of the year in shelters -- and that many pets get lost, injured, or killed.

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.



General Tips

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

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.

Nervous pets tend to drink more water, so keep more available than usual.

Drug-Free Remedies

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. You can include favorite or interactive toys and treats to help provide distraction.

Synthetic pheromone sprays such as Feliway for cats and Adaptil (formerly called D.A.P.) for dogs are available at pet stores. These sprays imitate the properties of the natural pheromones

that are produced by dogs and cats in times of stress; they have a calming effect on most animals.

Solliquin is a daily chewable supplement that can be used as well. It typically works best if they're on it before the firework season starts though.

Some pets respond to swaddling wraps, such as the Thundershirts. The pressure on the body may have a calming effect.

Behavioral Modification

If you can plan ahead for these summer events, we can also try modifying your pets behavior during these events.

Although it can be hard to slowly introduce your pets to fireworks, you can slowly try to increase their exposure. 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.

We can also attempt to create a positive association with fireworks if the anxiety isn't extreme. Give high-value food rewards (canned food or peanut butter), offer your pet his/her favorite toys or food puzzle toys, or have your pet practice his/her tricks with you. The goal is for him/her to learn that fireworks result in highly pleasant rewards.



You can also 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, TV, radio, or other sound machines can be used to muffle the sounds or a pheromone diffuser can provide natural motivation for the dog to seek this location. Hiding is not a sign of a problem, if the pet quickly returns to a normal behavior when the fireworks are over.

Medication

If your pet is nervous around loud, unexpected noises, a short-term sedative before the fireworks start may be just the ticket. As it's easier to prevent a fearful reaction than it is to reverse one, make sure to let us know ahead of time so that we can dispense a medication for you to have on hand to give your pet before the noise begins. Some medications often used for fireworks phobias in dogs include alprazolam, trazodone, and dexmedetomidine.

Other dogs will require a longer term medication to help prevent anxiety with fireworks. This often includes drugs that increase the level of serotonin (clomipramine or fluoxetine). These medications can take several weeks to reach a therapeutic level so we usually need to start your pet on this medication in the late spring.