

THE PET CONNECTION

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THUNDERSTORM PHOBIA, IS THERE ANY HELP FOR IT?!

Well, it's that time of year again in Florida, when thunderstorms become a normal occurrence in the afternoons and evenings. For any of you with a dog who is afraid of the noise and lightening flashes that accompany these storms it can be a very trying time. While it is very hard for dogs to overcome this phobia there are some things you can try that might help.

First of all it's important to know that thunderstorm phobia usually develops over time, so the sooner you notice the symptoms and do something to modify your dog's behavior the better your chances of helping your pet. Some of the symptoms of thunderstorm phobia include panting, pacing, drooling, trembling, hiding, whining or barking, and being destructive. The experts don't really know why some dogs are afraid of thunderstorms. Many animals are obviously frightened by the lightening flashes and loud noise of the thunder, wind and rain. But there is also the possibility that some dogs are more sensitive to drops in barometric pressure and changes in magnetic fields, both of which occur during thunderstorms.

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

Two of the most common types of behavior modification used to help pets with thunderstorm phobias are "desensitization" and "counter conditioning". Desensitization is a process where the thing feared is introduced in small amounts and then the stimulus is gradually increased until the animal is no longer sensitive to the stimulus. In the case of thunderstorm phobia one might try playing recordings of storms at very low volume, and then increase the volume and duration of the recording as your pet makes progress.

Counter conditioning "counters" the fear of the thunderstorm by introducing a very positive experience during the storm, such as a favorite treat or a favorite toy. In a sense it is a distraction, but the goal is to do more than merely distract, the positive experience is actually meant replace the animal's fear of the storm with the feeling of happiness or contentment that a favorite toy or treat might create.

A PLACE TO HIDE

It is very important that your dog have a place to hide during a thunderstorm, especially if you are not at home. Experts call this type of hiding place a "bolt hole". A bolt hole could be a closet with the door open, a bathroom, under the bed, or a crate that you have covered with a blanket. If you are home don't stop your pet from seeking a hiding place. Apparently bathroom tubs are a common hiding place. Some experts believe that a tub absorbs the vibrations of the thunder, and may even dissipate static electricity.

BODY WRAPS AND CAPES

It is believed that dogs with thunderstorm phobia are possibly afflicted with oversensitive or damaged nerve receptors. With this theory in mind "Thundershirts" for pets have been developed. These shirts resemble a sturdy stretchy vest that hugs the torso and chest of the dog like a body stocking. The

thought is that the constant gentle pressure provided by this type of shirt calms the nervous system.

Apparently static electricity can build up in your pet's coat during lightening storms, causing discomfort and even electric shocks. There's actually a doggie cape on the market called the Storm Defender that has been designed to protect your dog from this phenomenon. The cape has a special metallic lining that discharges a dog's fur and shields him from static build up.

NATURAL AND HOMEOPATHIC REMEDIES

An article in the Home Dog Journal reports that one of the most effective treatments for thunderstorm phobia is melatonin, an over the counter hormone used by humans to treat insomnia. Dogs 10lbs and under would be given .5 mg. Dogs less than 30lbs 1.5mg, and dogs over 30lbs 3mg. Read the label carefully to be sure that the melatonin is not mixed with herbs or other nutrients that may not be safe for dogs. If your dog has autoimmune disease or severe liver or kidney disease, check with your vet before giving melatonin.

A homeopathic remedy used for fear of thunder and loud noises is Phosphorous PHUS 30C, which is available in health food stores. You would drop 3-5 pellets down the back of your dogs throat (do not touch the pellets with your hand) every 15 minutes until you start to see results. If Phosphorous does not seem to work try Aconitum Napellus 30C. Flower essences can also be used to help emotional balance in dogs, and include Rescue Remedy, Calming Essence, and Five Flower Formula.

ANTI-ANXIETY MEDICATIONS AND TRANQUILIZERS

If your dog has severe thunderstorm phobia that cannot be helped using the above treatments then anti-anxiety medication or tranquilizers may offer a solution. Of course you will need the advice and help of your veterinarian for this. Some commonly prescribed anti-anxiety medications include xanax, bispirone, propranolol and inderol. The preferred drug of late is clomipramine (clomicalm) which is used to treat separation anxiety in dogs. In very extreme cases sedation may be the only solution. The tranquilizers most often prescribed are acepromazine, tranxene-SD, and valium.

COMPASSION

It is important to realize that your dog has no control over his fear of storms. Just like a child who is truly frightened of something, your dog needs to be consoled and encouraged. Yelling or loosing your patience with a storm phobic dog will only make the situation worse. Don't fight this battle alone, seek the aid of veterinarians, animal behaviorists and other pet professionals.