

BowWOW!

Facts, observations and musings about Our Best Friends

It Was A Dark and Stormy Night

The sky darkens. Wind begins to howl. Lightning crackles and strikes nearby. Thunder rumbles in the distance and Mr. Hoover, your Boston terrier, has just run up your leg seeking refuge on the top shelf of the linen closet...again.

Why does this happen to Mr. Hoover and so many other dogs? Why do some dogs become quivering messes and other dogs sleep peacefully through storms, fireworks, gunshots or falling pots and pans? There are two theories: one is that pups are “fear imprinted” between the ages of eight to 20 weeks when they are learning what is safe in the big, new world. Another theory is that dogs are affected by changes in static electricity that can create painful shocks. In this case, fear of loud noises, darkening sky and lightning then become the secondary conditioned fears added to the uncomfortable tingling sensations.

Here are a couple around-the-house suggestions that might help Mr. Hoover: because of the “tingle voltage” effect try rubbing him with a no-cling dryer sheet before storm clouds gather. It breaks the static *and* makes him smell April fresh. Also, he may feel safer in contact with plumbing fixtures in the bathroom, in essence, grounding him. Many dogs take comfort when crouched behind the toilet. Or you can power up the washer and dryer, creating a counter-noise and simply distract him from his misery. For milder cases, a long-lasting bribe, like a canine frozen treat can also refocus attention.

For more hard-core cases, you can try reducing the fear impact with medicinal herbs, called nervines, that are prescribed for anxiety, panic or hysteria. The most widely recommended is valerian root known for its heady “sweat sock” aroma, a smell most dogs appreciate. A few drops of valerian oil on a neckerchief will take the edge off if not lull Mr. Hoover completely to sleep. Valerian in tincture form can be served in a bit of soft food for the same result. Dosage depends on the weight of the “scaredy” dog. Other nervine herbs used for thunderstorm phobia include skullcap, vervain and St. John’s wort.

Many dog owners report good results using Rescue Remedy, one of the Bach flower essences. This famous preparation is a blend of 38 flower remedies (or hydrosols) and is appropriate for all emergencies for dogs and humans alike. It works best on behavioral issues that have an emotional cause. Rescue Remedy combats shock, panic and general freak-out. A few drops can be squirted directly into the mouth, served on a small piece of bread or diluted with water and sprayed on the dog. Other essences used to treat fears are Rock Rose, Aspen and Mimulus. Frequent application rather than increased dosage is the key to success with flower essences.

Recent studies have shown that one of the most effective treatments for thunderstorm phobia is melatonin, an over-the-counter remedy humans use to treat insomnia and jet-lag. For animals in the wild, it is the levels of melatonin in the body that trigger hibernation, migration and reproduction. It is known to affect a body's neurotransmitters, chemicals in the brain that transmit nerve impulses that effect fear responses among others. With dogs, as with humans, it will "take the edge off".

Melatonin works best if given when the thunderstorm is first predicted or when your dog first appears agitated. It will remain effective for several hours. It may not be as effective if administered after the dog is already in full panic attack mode. It is sold in grocery, drug and health food stores. Dosage depends on the weight of your dog. Remember, before starting your dog on any new therapy, always check with a practitioner or veterinarian for details.

BowWOW! Is a production of Tracie Korol and wholeDog.
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