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Tip Of The Tail

Thunderstorm Phobias

Every summer, veterinarians across South Florida are presented with patients suffering from thunderstorm phobia. Some dog owners can rightly claim that their pooch is better at predicting thunderstorms than the weatherman. With each approaching storm, these frightened dogs begin panting and pacing. As anxiety and fear increase, owners may also notice hypersalivation, vocalization, urination, defecation and even destructive and aggressive behaviors.

No one is quite sure why thunderstorms cause such severe anxiety and fear in some pets, while other pets don't even seem to notice. With their incredibly sensitive sense of hearing, some dogs can hear thunder from storms that are miles away. Some research also shows that many of these dogs can sense the increase in electrical charges in the air that precede lightning and thunderstorms. One thing is certain though, most of these poor pets can overcome their debilitating anxiety with appropriate treatment.

Most dogs will benefit from prescriptions to help lower anxiety and make the thunderstorm experience more tolerable. Anti-anxiety medications are given daily during the thunderstorm season in addition to a drug given when storms are expected. But as with most behavior problems, medications only make it easier to change the dog's behavior; they will not work without proper training.

The challenge to owners and veterinarians attempting to alleviate this problem is that thunderstorms occur repeatedly, yet sporadically and often unpredictably, throughout the summer. Since the symptoms often get worse with time and repeated experiences, it is important for owners to recognize and seek treatment for even mild signs of thunderstorm phobia. As with most behavior



problems, early recognition and treatment afford the best chance for a successful outcome.

Dogs with thunderstorm anxiety must be given tools to cope with the fear and panic that grips them during storms. For example, they need a safe place they can go where the sights and sounds of the storm are minimized. A positive activity or toy can provide a safe distraction from their fear. Also, while it is tempting for a concerned pet owner to cuddle their anxious dog, this only reinforces their fear and rewards the undesired behaviors. Instead, it is much more productive to engage the dog in play as this helps to instill that there is nothing to fear. During the off season, pets can be desensitized to the sounds and sights of thunderstorms and can be taught to relax on cue so that they will have a way to cope next season.

Thunderstorm phobia is extremely prevalent among dogs in South Florida. But these dogs and their owners have no reason to panic. With proper treatment and training, they will be *Singing in the Rain*.

Established in 1981, Palm City Animal Clinic is dedicated to providing the best possible care for your pets. With focuses on compassionate care in surgery, physical therapy and rehabilitation, preventative medicine, extensive diagnostics and emergency service, Palm City Animal Clinic combines exceptional medical care with a caring philosophy for pets and their owners. For more information, call (772) 283-0920, visit www.palmcityanimalclinic.com or find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/PalmCityAnimalClinic.