

Newsletter Autumn 2008

With the nights drawing in we are starting to think about fireworks.

There are several things you can do to help your pets at this time of year but most of them involve a little forward planning, so we have some ideas to help you.

Small garden pets

If you, or your neighbours, are planning fireworks in the garden make sure that rabbit and guinea pig hutches are somewhere safely away from the excitement and noise.

Cats

Cats are best kept indoors for the nights around November 5th as they can be startled by sudden noises and there is a risk they will run into the road and get injured.

Dogs

Dogs are the animals that cause their owners the most worry around firework night, as some can be very scared and can develop noise phobias. It isn't always possible to completely solve the problem but we have some ideas to help.

Things owners can do at home

Pull the curtains across to keep out flashes and put the TV/Radio/Music on loud to drown noises.

Many dogs have a hiding place they choose to go to when scared by fireworks, behind a sofa, in their bed etc. Make these places as comfortable as possible and allow the dog to go there. If your dog doesn't have a place consider making a "den" e.g. by putting a blanket over a table to make a cosy dark place, or, if you have an indoor kennel, covering that with a blanket.

It is important to resist the urge to comfort and fuss a frightened dog. It is a natural reaction for us to do this as it is what we would do for a child. However, a dog's mind works differently from ours. If you fuss a frightened dog they think they are doing what you want them to do, and that it is right to be frightened, so the best thing to do is to ignore them. If they start to relax then you can praise them. If the dog is just a bit apprehensive then it is worth trying to distract them with a game, but if they are really scared it is best just to leave them alone.

Items we can supply to help

Dap diffusers

These are plug in diffusers similar in appearance to air fresheners which release an analogue of a pheromone produced by lactating bitches, people can't smell it but it helps relax many dogs, it is best to start using these in the home at least 2 weeks before the first fireworks.

Over the counter medication

We have a new product called zylkene which is produced from milk and attaches to the same receptor sites in the brain as some anti anxiety medicines. Although it is new in the UK it has been used in Europe for some time, and is often successful in reducing anxiety. It is classed as a natural product and so it isn't necessary for the vet to examine your animal in order for us to provide it. We do however need an estimate of your dog's weight so you may prefer to bring him or her to the surgery for one of our nurses to weigh them. Ideally you should start giving the capsules (which are very palatable) 3 or 4 days before the effect is required and continue until the firework season is over.

Prescription Medicines

We often receive requests for sedatives for the firework season. Nowadays it is not thought wise to sedate animals who are frightened, this is because sedatives reduce mobility but not fear. A sedated animal is just as frightened but can't express it and so is likely to become more scared in future (imagine, if you are scared by spiders, being shut in a room with lots of spiders but unable to move to get away or to express your fear).

We can however prescribe anti anxiety medicines (usually diazepam) which will reduce your animal's distress (they won't however seem sleepy) these medications also impair short term memory and so they will also stop the increasing effect of several nights of fireworks. Ideally these tablets should be given an hour or so before the fireworks are expected but, because of the memory effect, it is still worth giving them after they have started. A small number of dogs have an atypical response to diazepam and become excited we would, therefore, say that you should stay with your dog the first time you give them and if this does happen you shouldn't use them again.

Before we can prescribe diazepam we must examine your dog, we will only dispense a small number of pills at a time but if the firework season is prolonged we will dispense more tablets without re examining him or her.

Desensitising and counter conditioning

It is possible to try to desensitise dogs with CDs of recorded fireworks, this is however time consuming and something to be considered for after the fireworks are over, we can discuss this with you if you wish.