STORM PHOBIAS IN DOGS

Storm phobias in dogs is real, not an uncommon syndrome, and shouldn’t be ignored. Why? Because any type of fear in dogs can diminish its quality of life and compromise its welfare, interactions and shared experiences with family members.

What is a phobia and storm phobia?

A phobia is a mental disease characterized by an exaggerated fear to specific stimuli that is out of proportion to the level of danger. Storm phobia is typically manifested by the onset of an exaggerated response and/or a panic attack in the presence of one or more phenomenon associated with a thunderstorm.

Diagnosing Storm Phobias

The first step is a visit to your veterinarian! Indeed, because the distress responses to storm phobia vary from mild to extreme, an evaluation of the type and intensity of signs help determine the treatment options best suited for the individual dog. The dog’s reaction to thunderstorms may be categorized as normal, fearful, anxious or phobic. In addition, dogs with thunderstorm phobias are likely to also have separation anxiety, which has been found to be associated with each other. Dogs with a combination of noise phobias, storm phobias, and separation anxiety may present more intense signs than dogs showing just one condition. Furthermore, the intensity of the phobia may affect the treatment response.

Signs may include panting, pacing, trembling, remaining near the owner, salivation, vocalization, destructive behaviour, indoor elimination, and self-trauma.

Treatment for Storm Phobia

1) Medication: Considerations for the use and type of medications include the health and age of the animal, the category of reaction to thunderstorm, the intensity of the phobia and the presence of separation anxiety and/or other noise phobias. A blood work up to evaluate the organs status is recommended before considering one or more medications and at least every 6 to 12 months for dogs requiring long term therapy.

Some dogs may require a medication administered before the onset of a storm, others may also need a medication administered on a regular basis during the thunderstorm season starting the month of February. Adverse effects are possible like any other medications and should be discussed with the veterinarian.

2) Medication and behaviour modification: This approach works well especially for pets with more extreme responses. Your veterinarian will explain to you 2 types of behaviour modification protocols to apply during the thunderstorm. The first type helps the dog engage in a rewardable
behaviour. Patting or speaking in soothing tomes should be avoided since it may send the message that the pet’s behaviour of fear is acceptable. The second type involves attempting to engage the dog in a more pleasant activity. Over time, desensitization and counterconditioning to sounds of a storm on CD may also be a useful behaviour modification intervention.

3) **Environmental Interventions:** Environmental interventions are useful adjustments during a storm. Sequestering the dog in a darkened room without windows blocks out visual stimuli, and using white noise or loud music to mask the sounds of the storm may help diminish responses to these stimuli. Although some individuals suggest products to cover the ears or body during storms, these products have not been studied for their efficiency or usefulness; it is possible that they could help certain patients.

4) **Natural anxiolytics:** Dog-apppeasing pheromone (DAP; ceva.com) is a synthetic analog of the appeasing pheromone secreted by the mammary glands of a nursing dog. Although no published placebo-controlled studies have examined pheromones for storm phobias, several studies have shown the efficiency of DAP diffusers as a reliable replacement to medications and behavior programs for treating firework phobias and other separation anxiety. The amino acid L-theanine (*Anxitane®, Virbac Animal Health*), and the tryptic casein, an ingredient derived from a milk protein (*Zylkène®, Vetoquinol*) may be interesting complements for their calming properties.

**Conclusion**

Each dog experiences storm responses in an individual manner. All treatment plans should be under veterinarian supervision and should consider incorporating medication, pheromones, and behavioral intervention. When these methods are properly combined, the behavior responses of many dogs can be controlled or improved during storms.

Reference: