

A small dog, possibly a Chihuahua, is lying on a wooden floor, partially covered by a bright red blanket. The dog's face is visible, looking towards the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

TOPIC OF THE MONTH: NOISE PHOBIA

Introduction

'Tis the season to be jolly! Christmas is fast approaching, 2015 is just around the corner and there are celebratory parties across the country. However, the love of fireworks on New Year's Eve and Australia Day and regular Australia afternoon thunderstorms make this a terrifying time for pets as their hearing is much more sensitive than humans¹. Vets, councils and rescue groups are flooded with frightened stray animals at this time of year. In the past, the RSPCA nationwide has prepared for a 400% increase in the number of animals arriving at their shelters from New Year's Eve into the first couple of days of the New Year following the fireworks². About 20% of pet dogs are affected by noise phobia³, so pet parents need to be informed this silly season!

What is noise phobia?

A phobia is an irrational fear of a stimulus due to the perception the stimulus is dangerous⁴. This results in a sympathetic nervous system response, known as the flight-or-fight response, or a panic attack³. Noises that commonly result in a phobia include thunderstorms, fireworks, vacuum cleaners, sirens and lawn mowers⁴, but can also be due to other factors, such as the sight of a vacuum cleaner, frequency of the noise or a fall in barometric pressure prior to a storm^{3,4}. Reports in cats are less common likely due to their hiding rather than owner-seeking behaviour when distressed³. Additionally, reports are rare in small mammals, e.g. rabbits and guinea pigs, but they are likely to suffer from similar fears³.

Causes of noise phobia

Developmental phobias which result from a lack of exposure to certain sounds or repetitive exposure leading to sensitisation, most commonly develop in the first year of life³. Phobias which develop later in life during periods of stress are most common in animals experiencing cognitive decline or dementia³. Learned phobias result from a traumatic interaction with a noise, usually during the early stages of life, or by copying the fear-reaction of other animals to certain noises³. Phobias can also be temperamental, meaning they are influenced by both the environment and the genetic make-up of the animal³. Studies have shown animals with low levels of some growth factors or a family history of noise phobia may be predisposed³. Animals with temperamental phobia are more likely to develop multiple phobias during life and relapse following behavioural and medical treatment³. There is no strong evidence linking gender and phobias, however neutered animals appear to be overrepresented, however this may be slightly skewed as more animals are neutered than not³. This could be related to the influence of hormones, for example progesterone in females has an anxiety-reducing effect³. Owners also play a major role in reinforcing phobic behaviour inadvertently, particularly new pet parents³. Increasing attention to the animal and comforting them during the experience reinforces to the animal that there is something to be afraid of, and therefore encourages the behaviour³.

Signs of noise phobia

Owners most commonly recognise something is wrong by the reaction of their animal upon hearing or during a noise event. The obvious signs of a noise phobia include^{3,4}:

- Pacing, hiding, trembling and seeking out the owner

- Licking lips, inappetance, vomiting and salivation
- Low tail carriage and crouching to the ground
- Excessive grooming and self-trauma
- Continuous yawning and vocalisation
- Property damage (house soiling, chewing), trying to escape and running onto the road
- Diarrhoea, frequent urination and expressing anal glands.

However, animals may show more signs in the anticipation of an event, which is less easily recognised.

Additionally, less obvious signs include the animal becoming very quiet or the physiological response to the phobia, such as dilation of the pupils, increased blink frequency, an increased or decreased heart rate, sweaty paws and tense muscles^{3,4}. True noise phobia must be distinguished from learned attention-seeking behaviour³. Attention seeking animals will have learnt to show behavioural changes in response to a stimulus, such as seeking the owner, curling in a ball or hiding without physiological changes, such as an increased heart rate or vomiting³.

Treatment and management:

Exercise animals prior to the noise event to tire them out, such as a brisk walk with a dog or a game with a cat⁴. During the noise event, animals should be kept secured inside in an isolated area, to limit damage they may cause^{3,4}. Secure hiding places can be created, such as a cupboard lined by pillows to reduce noise volume, that the animal can seek out when scared, particularly if the owner is not home or if there is a party occurring at the house^{3,4}. Owners should not reinforce the behaviour by comforting the animal, but instead be unresponsive to the noise to indicate to the animal that the noise is not a concern³. A Thunder Shirt[®] can make animals feel secure, without owner engagement³, or alternatively a pheromone calming collar or infuser.

Alternatively, owners can engage their pet in their favourite game during the noise event as a distraction and to make it a positive experience^{3,4}. Distracting noises, such as turning on the radio or the TV, can be of value. Outside of the immediate noise event, animals should be gradually desensitised to the noise, using noises that resemble the noise initially and then moving on to the problem noise, such as on a recording or identical noises from the internet^{3,4}. Medications may be required in the short-term for some cases during the noise event, but should NOT replace behavioural therapy and modification³. Some drugs are able to block memory and reduce anxiety, while others block the sympathetic or flight-or-fight response. Animals with noise phobia should be examined for other underlying disorders, such as cognitive decline or hypothyroidism, both of which have been associated with noise phobia⁴. Ensure microchip and collar details are up to date in case the animal does escape.

References

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3. Mills, D 2005, 'Management of noise fears and phobias in pets', *In Practice*, vol. 27, no. 5, pp. 248-255.
4. Ballamwar, VA, Bonde, SW, Mangle, NS and Vyavahare, SH 2008, 'Noise Phobia in Dog', *Veterinary World*, vol. 1, no. 11, pp. 35¹-35².