

Keeping Pets Safe and Well During the Holiday Season

In Australia the holiday season brings warm weather and festivities but both of these may be stressful for our pets. Summer means thunderstorms and the holidays bring fireworks; two things many owners of reactive pets struggle with. To make sure pets are safe and well during the holidays, it's important to consider all aspects of managing stressful situations, both in the short and long term.



Many pets are afraid of loud noises, and this can lead to dangerous behaviours regarding the safety of the animals. There are however things we can do to help keep them calmer and safer. Animals have acute senses: for them every flash and bang can be unexpected and alarming.

The following behaviours are indicators the pet might need help coping.

Cats and dogs

- Cowering or hiding behind the sofa
- Trying to run away or escape
- Soiling the house etc. Animals have acute senses: for them every flash and bang can be unexpected and alarming. The following behaviours are indicators the pet might need help coping.

Dogs only

- Barking incessantly
- Digging up the carpet
- Restlessness, e.g. pacing and panting

SHORT-TERM MANAGEMENT

To address these in the short term, the following steps can make a significant difference for your clients. Recommend these to manage stressful situations like thunder storms in the short term.

IN PREPARATION:

Talk to an expert: Continue to discuss your pet's behaviour with your Vet or behaviourist to ensure suitable steps are taken.

Build a den: It's important that your pet has their own safe place with which, they have positive associations. This gives them somewhere to hide when they are uneasy or worried. A den is useful all year round, but is especially good for the holiday/storm season.

Keep the following in mind for the den:

- **Familiarisation:** Prepare the den at least three weeks before for your pet to get used to it.
- **Location:** Put the den or hiding place in a room where your pet usually likes to hide and where they feel comfortable. For example, if they like to hide behind the sofa, put it there, although make sure it is away from any windows.
- **Free Access:** Allow your pet to access the den freely at all times. This way they have chosen to go there and are not forced. Do not use it as somewhere to send them as a punishment.
- **Size:** Ensure the den is large enough for your pet to comfortably stand up, lie down, stretch out and turn around.

For dogs it's also a good idea to line the den with used blankets, towels or old clothes to make it smell familiar, and to provide treats and toys in the den, to enable your dog to associate it with positive things. A heavy blanket can be placed on top of the den to muffle sounds further. For cats it's important to remember that they feel more comfortable up high; think about where you put their hiding place. Like all resources make sure you have a litter tray for each cat, plus one extra. Even a single cat needs two dedicated litter trays.

“ Animals have acute senses: for them every flash and bang can be unexpected and alarming. ”

Update their identification: Your pet might try to run away if fireworks go off near them. Just in case, make sure that the data linked to their microchips and the information on their tags is fully up to date so they will be reunited with you more quickly. It's better to do it sooner rather than later as some people will start setting off fireworks as soon as they are available in the shops.

Give them Zylkene: A supplement like Zylkene can help dogs and cats cope during festivities which incorporate firework displays and during summer's heavy storms. Start Zylkene at least three days before the event is expected and continue throughout the holiday season. Keep in mind this time can last for a few months; in some areas well into the New Year.



TIPS FOR DURING FIREWORKS OR STORMS:

- Always keep cats and dogs inside the house when fireworks are being let off or when there is heavy thunder. If this is not an option, ensure they have a safe covered area. Do not take your dog to a fireworks display!
- Pull the curtains and switch on the TV or radio to dull the noise from the fireworks.
- Don't force your pets to come to you, especially if they are in their hiding place or den.
- Stay calm and don't react to loud noises yourself.
- Play with a toy and see if your pet wants to join in, but don't force them.
- Ignore unusual behaviour, such as panting, shaking or whining, unless they come to you first for reassurance. Give them affection, but no more than usual. Pets often pick up on their owner's worry and overcompensating could make things worse.
- Provide distractions, for example new toys or treats.
- DO NOT punish or get angry with your pet! This will only make them more uneasy.

LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT

These are steps your clients may take in the long term to better manage their pet's behaviour.

Setting your pet up for success: Once this high risk time has passed it's a good time to consider how you can best manage your pet's situation long term to make it less frightening next time. It's worth being aware that if left unmanaged these behaviours can get worse over time, resulting in increasingly uncontrolled behaviour. It can also have the effect of worsening their response to other unexpected loud noises.

Sound Desensitisation: One of the most common methods is using a "sound desensitisation" programme. There have been studies that have shown this to be effective for dogs and cats. They work by gradually exposing your pet to a tiny amount of sound and then increasing it slowly over time. It can be a long process, but it's worth it in the end. These should always be done in consultation with a veterinarian or behaviourist.



Article supplied by Vetoquinol