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Fourth of July: Keeping Pets Safe and Happy



JEN REEDER

Brad Benz remembers the Fourth of July he spent in Seattle with his Border collie mix, Maggie – and not in a good way.

"At about midnight, our neighbors had an impromptu fireworks display that lasted over an hour," he recalls. "Maggie was terrified. She was up on the bed panting and shaking – a nervous wreck. Nothing could calm her down."

The Fourth of July and its accompanying celebrations can be a traumatic experience for pets like Maggie. A little preparation can go a long way toward making sure that they are safe and happy when the festivities begin.

Eliza Mazzaferro, MS, DVM, PhD, DACBECC, director of emergency services at Wheat Ridge Veterinary Specialists in Colorado, says the Fourth of July is a busy time because of the inherent risks the holiday poses to pets. The most common culprit: fireworks.

"Pets get anxious and break out of kennels, jump through windows and get lacerations, and when loose, can get hit by cars," Mazzaferro says. "We have also seen where people toss a firework or firecracker into the air, and the dog jumps up, swallows it, and the firecrackers cause severe damage to the internal organs."

Obviously pet owners should prevent their dogs from swallowing firecrackers, but even the noise can injure their stomachs; in large breed dogs, Mazzaferro has seen an increased incidence of bloat or GDV (gastric dilation and volvulus), where the stomach twists. This occurs when dogs are nervous or excited, which happens during firework anxiety.

You can tell if the noise is affecting your pet if they tremble, bark, howl, try to hide, or get so anxious that they attempt to break free from their enclosures. In these cases, Mazzaferro recommends staying with them to help calm them down, rather than leaving them home alone. It's a good idea to keep them inside, making sure that they don't chew anything in their excited state.

"Moving things that can be destroyed or are harmful is beneficial," Mazzaferro says. "However, in very anxious pets, I have seen them bite through a metal cage and injure their teeth and gums, and also jump through plate glass windows. They try to escape the noise, not knowing that it is outside. I have seen dogs chew through doors and dry wall, so just keeping them confined to a room or a dog crate is not always foolproof to prevent injury."

In such extreme cases, it may be wise to have a prescription for anti-anxiety medication from your veterinarian. Testing the medication before the holiday is a good idea to ensure that it has the appropriate effect.

In case your pet does run away, it is important to be sure their collar has a tag with the current phone number on it. Mazzaferro suggests that all pets be microchipped, and that the contact information it contains is current as well.

"Too frequently, we see pets brought in by Good Samaritans having been found injured, and we attempt to contact the owner with the information provided by the microchip company, and find that the numbers are not current or have been disconnected, and we cannot reunite the pet with their owner," she says.

Other problems for pets that occur around the Fourth of July include pets getting wounded during fights at backyard barbecues with other animals, or eating table scraps like corn cobs, ribs, hot dogs or shish kabobs that can cause gastrointestinal upset (vomiting and diarrhea) or even pancreatitis, an inflammation of the pancreas. Cats can get an obstruction in the stomach or intestines that can be life threatening without surgery. To keep pets safe, partygoers should not put their plates or drinks on the ground where pets can reach them.

Barbecues can also attract bees and wasps. Allergic reactions to insect stings can cause swelling of the face, hives, itchiness, vomiting, diarrhea, and in the worst case scenarios, respiratory distress and collapse. If a pet shows any of these signs, they need to go to the nearest veterinary hospital for treatment.

Finally, summer heat can create health issues. Mazzaferro stresses that pets should never be left in a car under any circumstances to avoid heat stroke. She also suggests walking or exercising pets during the coolest part of the day, with plenty of shade, and access to water every 20 minutes to avoid heart exertion. If your pet is tired, collapses, or starts making increased breathing sounds, stop the activity, have your pet rest in the shade with cool water, and have them evaluated by a veterinarian.

By taking these precautions, you'll ensure that both you and your pet enjoy a happy Fourth of July!

Jen Reeder is a Denver-based freelance journalist who loves both fireworks and barbecues.

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