Pheromones Against Fear

Veterinarians are often asked how to help dogs that respond fearfully to loud noises. Behavior modification is one method of treating these dogs, but this therapy requires a commitment that may not be possible for some owners. Medications are also used, but these need to be given in advance of the episode and have varying results and side effects that may make them unsuitable. This study evaluated using a dog-appeasing pheromone (DAP) in 30 dogs that had previously shown signs of fear of fireworks. DAP is a synthetic mixture of simple compounds that have been identified from the secretions of the sebaceous glands in the intermammary sulcus of bitches shortly after parturition. The pheromone is believed to have a calming effect in both puppies and adult dogs. This was an open, uncontrolled trial. The pet owners were given a plug-in diffuser with the pheromone and advised to locate the device as close as possible to their dog’s usual resting area. They were also provided with general guidelines for managing the fearful behavior. The testing occurred at a time when fireworks were a common occurrence. Owners were provided with sheets to record daily the details for fireworks exposure and the dog’s behavioral response. Owners reported a lower overall fear rating than at the baseline assessment. Twenty-one of the owners stated they were either “very satisfied” or “mainly satisfied,” and 24 would like to try the treatment again in the future. Although lack of a placebo control means some caution is required in evaluating these results, it does not invalidate them. A precise measurement of efficacy was not tested, but the observed responses to the treatment suggest it has potential value. Supported by a grant from Ceva Santé Animale.

COMMENTARY: There are several times of year when fireworks bring fear to many dogs, such as the Fourth of July, Christmas, and New Years. A product that could provide some relief of the fear without undesirable side effects would benefit both the dogs and their owners. It is possible that this therapy might even reduce the amount of medical treatment needed.—Patricia Thomblison, DVM, MS