

Veterinary Ireland Media Release (Friday 26th October 2012)



Vets Highlight Halloween and Fear Problems in Dogs

According to **Veterinary Ireland's Companion Animal Society (VICAS)**, a percentage of dogs each year will show heightened or extreme (phobic) fear responses to fireworks used during the Halloween period.

Speaking on the lead up to Halloween, vet and animal behaviourist Orla Doherty MVB MSc MRCVS of VICAS stated that "a fearful temperament can be inherited, and a percentage of dogs in the population will, as result of their genetic makeup be more likely to respond with fear to a variety of situations".

"Studies have found that events which are unpredictable, and which the animal is unable to control in any way (including removing themselves from the situation) result in high levels of stress. The unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of fireworks, from a dog's perspective, is likely to contribute to the high levels of fear displayed by many pets during the Halloween season," she said.

"Unfortunately, this behaviour is frequently unwittingly reinforced or rewarded by the owner's own actions, through comforting and reassuring the animal when fear responses are displayed. The level of fear displayed by the pet frequently increases year by year, unless some form of intervention or treatment is undertaken by the owner," she added.

VICAS notes that preventative measures may help reduce the occurrence or development of these responses and treatment of fearful or phobic responses to Halloween related activities usually require some or all of the following steps to be carried out:

Minimize Exposure

- **Dogs should be kept indoors at times when fireworks are likely to be heard.** This may mean exercising the dog earlier in the day, or if this is not possible, giving extra stimulation through the use of food releasing toys, play sessions, etc.
- **Radio and television may help to drown out the noises from outdoors. Similarly, closed curtains and windows will help reduce exposure.**
- **Removing the dog from the vicinity of high levels of fireworks activity** (e.g. by taking the pet out of the town or city during Halloween) may benefit the dog by reducing exposure and the resultant increases in fear.

Increase Stimulation

- **Ensuring that the dog is tired** will in many cases increase the likelihood of the dog relaxing and even sleeping at times of the greatest fireworks activity. Walking the dog, play sessions or using food releasing toys, all help to use up the dog's energy and reduce activity levels at the end of the day.

Provide a "Retreat Area"

- **Many dogs retreat to a secluded area in the house in response to hearing fireworks. This should be allowed,** and that area made as comfortable as possible for the dog. It is vital that owners do not reassure the dog during a display of fearful behaviours as by doing so, they may be unwittingly reinforcing or rewarding these behaviours.

Medication

- Few medications are likely to overcome the fear response of dogs to fireworks, particularly if the level of fear is high. However, in conjunction with the measures outlined above, **medication may be of benefit to the dog to reduce the level of fear** and increase the welfare of the dog during the Halloween period.
- **Owners should first consult with their vet,** who will recommend the best medications, if any, to give to that specific dog.

Vet **Liam Moriarty MVB, Chair of VICAS**, states that "**the best place for specific advice for your pet is your own vet.** Vets are your pet's health professional, and are experts in animal health and welfare. Our recently launched website www.lovemypet.ie contains valuable news and advice for both vets and their clients, especially at stressful times like Halloween".



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION VISIT: www.veterinaryireland.ie and www.lovemypet.ie

For further Media Information

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Veterinary Ireland is the representative body for veterinary practitioners in all aspects of Irish veterinary practice.

Members of the **Veterinary Ireland Companion Animal Society (VICAS)** are primarily veterinary practitioners focused on companion animals – pets – and on promoting pet health pet welfare, and responsible pet ownership. VICAS is involved in a number of ongoing Pet Health and Welfare initiatives, including World Animal Week, Spay Ireland 2012 and the recently launched on-line initiative, **Love-My-Pet.ie**.

Veterinary Ireland is happy to provide appropriately qualified and informed persons to answer questions and to contribute to any debate, in a constructive and reasoned manner.