

Fireworks and thunderstorms – advice for owners

Produced by: Onderstepoort Behaviour Clinic, Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital

Many pets are scared (even extremely fearful) of loud noises, especially fireworks and thunderstorms. This condition is known as noise phobia. Treatment of noise phobia requires a combination of environmental management, behaviour modification and medication. Early treatment, i.e. before the dog develops a severe phobia, prevents the problem from getting worse. Treatment is less successful if you wait until the problem has progressed to a severe state. Advice on the use of drugs should only be sought from a qualified veterinarian.

Short term:

- Try to **divert** your dog's attention to a more constructive activity such as play early on before it can become very fearful. Throw a ball, introduce an attractive toy or chew not seen for some time or teach the dog tricks with delicious food treats as rewards. Sometimes playing calm (classical) music also distracts the dog effectively. In cases of severe phobia, this approach will not help and the dog will have to be put onto medication.
- Help your dog **relax** by showing that you are not afraid. You may reinforce nervous behaviour if you fuss too much over your frightened dog. Be there for your pet but maintain a cool and relaxed attitude, whilst going about your normal daily business. This is the best way to reassure your pet that everything is normal. Do allow your pet to find comfort by close physical contact if that is its preference.
- **Do not reprimand** or punish your dog when it behaves out of its normal character during a fearful event. Some dogs become destructive or aggressive during phobic events, acting entirely out of intense fear.
- A **safe, soundproof den** or crate should be provided in a familiar, accessible place such as in a bedroom or on the patio in a sheltered spot, where the dog already tends to go voluntarily. Your pet must have free access to it whether you are at home or not. Get your dog used to it in a fun way when there are no scary sounds so that he will voluntarily enter the den when necessary. Put some soft furnishings like pillows or blankets inside the den as this helps to absorb sounds. A pile of blankets to crawl under, even without a den, will help to block out sounds. If indoors, windows and curtains or blinds should be closed to block out light and sound.
- Ask your vet about **DAP** (dog appeasing pheromone). This has been shown to be very helpful in cases of sound phobia. It is important that you use the real DAP and this product is called Adaptil. No other product contains the correct pheromone.

- Ask your vet about anxiety reducing (anxiolytic) **medication**. The group of medicines most commonly used are the benzodiazepines. Your vet will need to see the dog in order to prescribe the medication as it is scheduled medication. The sooner you start treating noise phobias, the less likely the problem will progress to a serious level.
- Some dogs benefit from a garment or bandage around the trunk. There are commercially produced “**thunder shirts**” available, but in many cases just a relatively tight-fitting T-shirt may be helpful. Be aware that for some dogs, wearing a shirt is in itself scary and they freeze when it is put on them (don’t mistake this freezing with reduced anxiety!) – so try it before there is a storm or fireworks to see whether your dog will be comfortable with it or not.

Long term:

- Long-term **medication** (from the anti-depressant family) helps reduce ongoing anxiety and anticipation of noise. This long-term medication will not have an immediate drastic effect but will be more likely to improve the problem in the long term. It can be used in conjunction with the short-acting benzodiazepines mentioned above. It will help the dog learn to cope better in scary situations. This medication is scheduled, so you need to take the dog to the vet for a prescription. These drugs have very few and mild side-effects and are particularly safe to use for long periods of time.
- Systematic **desensitisation**: The dog is gradually exposed to low levels of the fear-eliciting sound, slowly becoming louder and louder. The recommended product to use is the *Sounds Scary* CD available from vets (see also www.soundsscary.com). Be sure to read the instructions thoroughly before you use it!
- Ask your vet for more advice, or to refer you to a professional pet behaviour consultant.

Prevention:

- Very young animals can be taught to tolerate loud noise more readily than adults. When exposed to lower levels of the relevant noise, especially when associated with something pleasant like play and treats, they quickly learn that the noise holds no real danger. The noise level can then gradually be increased to real levels. Prevention is always better than cure – but keep in mind that dogs need this type of exposure before they are 5 months old for it to have the desired effect. The *Sounds Sociable* CD from SoundsScary (see info above) is useful for this purpose.