

Training your dog:

Fear of Fireworks

Sound phobias are a common behaviour problem. At first it may only happen in relation to specific seasonal events. However, with age dogs' fears tend to increase to a wide variety of noises such as thunder, gunshots & balloons and their reactions become more extreme.

Reactions to fireworks can vary from panic stricken urination and defecation in the house and destructive behaviour to irrational behaviour and aggression. It is then that the dog's fear becomes a danger to itself and its owners.

In addition, we are often unaware that the way in which we react to a sound sensitive dog may reinforce the fear and consequent reaction and have a direct bearing on the dog's future reaction.

Preparing for Fireworks

Create a safe environment

Protect fearful dogs by walking them in daylight wherever possible where there is less chance of fireworks and keep them on the lead to prevent them running off in panic. Microchipping will ensure that if your dog does escape in a blind panic it may be identified and returned to you more easily.

In any fearful situation a dog's natural coping strategy is to hide. Most dogs have somewhere in the house where they retreat to when feeling insecure. This behaviour is normal so if possible ensure that your dog can hide without interruption and re-emerge in his own time when he feels safe.

If your dog doesn't seem to know where to go to hide, you may need to create somewhere. A suitable place might be a room or cupboard space near the centre of the house which is naturally quiet and has a minimal number of windows. Make it comfortable and use blankets to create a den and muffle sound. It can be comforting to include an old unwashed piece of clothing that smells of you.

Supporting pets with Firework Fear

Dog Appeasing Pheromones (D.A.P)

Undetectable by the human nose, these are synthetically produced pheromones which mimic those from the bitch when nursing her puppies and can reduce anxiety in adult dogs. They can be useful in all situations where dogs feel stressed as the dog subconsciously associates the pheromone with a sense of security. **They are available as diffusers, sprays or collars.**

Plug in a DAP diffuser as close as possible to or even inside the hiding place. This should be left operating 24 hours a day from 2 weeks before the firework event until 2 weeks after (but even if there are only a few days to go before the event, it is still worth using the DAP products because they may help).

D.A.P. makes dogs feel more relaxed and confident

More information and D.A.P. products are available from the surgery.

Natural Supplements

These are available as palatable capsules which can be given whole, or opened and the powder mixed into liquid or food. The neutral product is derived from a bioactive protein found in milk and has been found to be effective in calming stress in both dogs and cats. It needs to be given only once per day and takes effect very quickly so no build up period is required. Although not always effective in very phobic pets, this product may give enough relief to get through the firework season calmly. It can be used for short and long term anxiety.

More information is available from the surgery.

Prescription Medication

Traditionally sedatives were used to help dogs through phobic events however these can actually make the problem worse in the long term. Sedated dogs are **aware** and still afraid of the fireworks but are unable to get up and hide and so while appearing quiet often retain a greater fear of loud noises in the future.

More recently anxiety relieving drugs such as diazepam have proved to be more effective in helping dogs with phobia problems. Depending on the dose, these drugs can block a dog's memory of an event, cause a reduction in anxiety, or produce sedation.

Diazepam is better than a sedative because it blocks memory, so the dog cannot remember being frightened – this means that your dog's fear will not get any worse. However, it is not a strong sedative, so your dog may appear a little more unsettled than with a sedative. A safe hidey hole and the use of DAP may help settle your dog.

To ensure diazepam will be a suitable medication for your dog to take throughout the firework season the vet will give your dog a thorough health examination and prescribe a test dose. A small number of dogs given diazepam will show side effects. These are temporary and not dangerous, but may mean that it will not be a suitable medication.

Your vet will request that a low test dose be given at a time when you can keep your dog inside and supervised for at least 3-4 hours. The effects of the drug last for about 4 hours and you should see very little effect on your dog's behaviour. He should be supervised during this time and prevented from attempting stairs or areas where co-ordination and balance are important. Side effects such as pacing, panting, staggering as if drunk or anxiety are rare and will pass with no long term effects but probably mean that another drug would be more suitable. Any apparent side effects should be reported to the vet.

The majority of dogs respond well to diazepam and an appropriate dose will be prescribed by the vet for use in periods of anxiety.

Top Tips on the Night

1. On evenings when fireworks are expected, ensure pets are safely indoors and doors and windows securely closed.
2. Where possible take dogs out to toilet before dark and always on a lead in case of unexpected fireworks
3. Draw curtains early to reduce external noise and play music or keep the TV turned up to mask sounds of fireworks.
4. Ignore any fearful behaviour and carry on as normal.
5. Resist the urge to comfort your dog as this will reward fearful behaviour and make your dog dependent upon you for security.

6. Don't punish your pet as this will reinforce the fear reaction.
7. Allow your dog to hide in his or her 'bolt hole' and leave it alone where it feels most secure.
8. Try not to go out during potentially upsetting events as this will increase the dog's anxiety.

Preparing for next year

Ultimately the best solution is to reduce the fear. This can be done by 'desensitising' the dog to loud noises by gradual controlled exposure and positive reinforcement. Rewarding the dog for good behaviour will gradually allow him to associate the noises with positive experiences. Desensitisation training takes time, however it offers a long term solution to reduce noise based anxiety.

It is common for dogs with sound sensitivity or noise phobias to develop a reaction to a range of different sounds. A fear of, fireworks, can become generalised to include all bangs, such as gunshots, balloons popping, cars back firing, and even seemingly unrelated sounds. We recommend the 'Sounds Scary' CD which has a range of noises and comes with a booklet explaining how to introduce the noises to your dog. It is best to focus on the noise that most affects the dog first.

For further advice see our Desensitisation training leaflet or contact your surgery.

Avonvale
Veterinary Centres

**For more information
Please contact your Avonvale Vet**

**Warwick 01926 400255
Southam 01926 812826
Wellesbourne 01789 841072
Kenilworth 01926 854181**

www.avonvets.co.uk