

Factsheet 5 - Fear of Fireworks



Sound phobias are a relatively common problem in pet animals. Pets can show a fear response to many loud noises most noticeably fireworks, thunder and traffic. In some cases if the pet suffers repeated exposure to these noises and is unable to express coping behaviour the problem can worsen over time.

Behavioural therapy can be used which may even lead to a permanent "cure" of the phobia.

1. What can be done to help in the short term?

- You should exercise your dog in the afternoon to ensure they get home before the fireworks start.
- If you own a cat then try to keep the cat indoors.
- Feeding a stodgy high carbohydrate meal such as pasta will make your dog feel sleepy.
- Provide a safe refuge. Put a comfortable bed there and provide chews/toys. An animal's natural reaction to a scary stimulus is to hide. Some pets already have a place they will go to get away either under a desk or behind the sofa. It is important to allow the pets to go to these places and make them feel comfortable there. Therefore don't tell them off for going there
- Ensure they have access to this refuge at all times, propping doors open if necessary, in case a single firework goes off at another time.
- Close curtains and windows.
- Turn on the room lights and make it as bright as possible. This will decrease the intensity of the flashes from outside.
- Turn on the television fairly loudly. This will reduce the effect of sudden bangs from outside. Best of all, use a music channel as these have loud sounds and flashing lights already!
- Perhaps the most difficult but important action is to not comfort your pet when scared. Although it is natural to want to comfort your pet this kind of action only serves to re-enforce the fear response, if left alone

your pet is more likely to settle and is less likely to be worse on the next occasion.

2. The DAP® plug in diffuser

There is a new product available that can really help for stressed dogs. It uses synthetic Dog Appeasing Pheromone which mimics a natural scent (a pheromone) that makes your pet dog feel relaxed. It is available as a plug-in diffuser that continually releases the chemical over the day.

Ideally the DAP diffuser should be used 24 hours a day from 2 weeks before the fireworks start and continued for 2 weeks afterwards. It should be placed close to the area the dog chooses to hide in.

Feliway® is an equivalent product for cats.

3. Medical therapy

For phobic animals that fail to respond to simple action, medication is available and can work really well indeed. We use anxiolytics which stop the adrenaline surge that creates the feelings of panic that would otherwise reinforce the phobia. Consider the analogy of fear-of-flying in people - the same chemical pathways trigger the same behavioural anxiety. The product we use is very safe and can be very effective indeed, but you will need to start it a few weeks before the anticipated.



Make an appointment to discuss the pros and cons of the treatment before any medication can be dispensed.

4. Behavioural therapy

The aim of behavioural therapy is to decrease the pets' phobic reactions to the stimulus (desensitisation) and then induce a positive association with the stimulus to prevent relapse in the long term (counter conditioning). This therapy can not be carried out when there is a chance that the animal might be exposed to the noise stimulus as this is likely to reverse any positive effects that the therapy might have achieved up until that point. In practical terms this means that behavioural therapy for fireworks should start as soon as possible after November 5th in order to give an eight week window of training before

fireworks around New Years Eve, likewise therapy for thunder phobia should be carried out in the months before the main thunder storm season (summer).

Behavioural therapy involves the use of a CD of the sounds that pets find most alarming. This is played at very low levels whilst the pet and owners continue to behave as if nothing unusual is happening. Over a period of time the volume is gradually increased up to a maximum, and the pet at this stage should not be reacting.

