



Fear Of Fireworks



Why is my pet frightened of fireworks?

Every pet is different but broadly speaking pets which are afraid of fireworks fall into one of two groups:

- those which have had a bad experience with fireworks in the past (for example a rocket going off close to them) and associate the sounds with being frightened- learned behaviour
- those which are afraid of all sorts of loud noises - noise phobia

Noise phobic dogs do sometimes require extra behaviour therapy as they often have high levels of anxiety in general.

What can be done to solve the problem?

As we all know, fireworks make distinctive noises. Many humans find the constant bangs and whistles around bonfire night unsettling, so imagine what it must be like to have the sensitive hearing of a dog. Unfortunately it is impossible to explain to a pet that the fireworks are just noisy and not a threat to them.

In the short term what we can do is follow the steps in our 'Top Tips' factsheet to provide a secure area for your pet at home and help manage your pets stress by using pheromone treatment in the run up to the firework season.

In the long term, sound desensitisation has been shown to be very successful for animals with firework phobias. You cannot do this during firework season as it needs to be done when there are no fireworks going off. It is best started around springtime. It is really important to consider long term control as fear of fireworks generally gets worse if left and can lead to fears of other loud noises such as thunder.

D.A.P

Dog Appeasing Pheromone is very useful for helping to calm dogs naturally. They work by releasing appeasing pheromones into the home on a sustained basis. This can be used to good effect to reduce the anxiety provoking effects of fireworks. In mammals, all nursing females release substances called appeasing pheromones, the function of which is to reassure their offspring. Canine appeasing pheromones are secreted by the mum 3 to 5 days after birth enhancing the attachment between the puppy and its mother providing reassurance and comfort. D.A.P are available in diffusers, sprays and collars.

Feliway

Feliway is a synthetic copy of the facial pheromone used by cats to mark their territory as safe and secure. By mimicking this pheromone Feliway creates a state of familiarity and security in the cat's local environment. Feliway can help to comfort and reassure cats while they cope with a challenging situation and help prevent or reduce the amount of stress caused by a change in their environment. It may also help reduce fearful reactions to loud noises and reduce stress due to indoor confinement. Feliway is available in a diffuser or spray form.

Your veterinary practice can provide you with information to help you use the products to their maximum efficacy.

Zylkene

Zylkene is a natural product that comforts animals in a similar way to D.A.P and Feliway and has been shown to help pets manage stressful situations. It contains the same molecule that helps babies relax after a milk feed and comes from a milk protein. Unfortunately animals cannot make Zylkene when they stop feeding from their mother but they can still respond to it in the same way. Zylkene is available in a capsule form which needs to be given once a day. The capsules can be given whole or opened and the palatable powder mixed in with food or a treat. Zylkene is suitable for both short and long term use to reduce stress in cats and dogs.

Please ask your veterinary practice for more information. D.A.P, Feliway and Zylkene are all available over the counter.

Sedatives

Unfortunately some pets do not respond to the natural products as their fear is too severe or they are noise phobic. In this instance sedative drugs may be required for a short period of time. These are available from your veterinary surgeon but they will require your pet to have had a recent health check and you may be asked to bring your pet in for a consultation. This is to ensure there are no underlying health problems which could be exacerbated by the medication. The most common drug used nowadays is Diazepam as this helps reduce their anxiety and can make them sleepy. This is not recommended for long term use and desensitisation programs should be discussed with your veterinary surgeon.

Desensitisation and counter- conditioning programs

Desensitisation is the process where the response to a fear inducing stimulus is reduced by repeated neutral exposure. The program aims to help your pet learn to cope with fireworks by gradually allowing them to become used to the noises associated with fireworks. This will require a lot of time and commitment from you to work through the programme in full to be successful. Even the mildest noise phobia can take several months to treat. SoundTherapy4Pets have created a CD designed to recreate the noises associated with fireworks in a random pattern. The CD comes with an in depth booklet of instructions which you must work through in order starting with the CD at a low volume and over time gradually increasing as recommended. Remember animals are far more sensitive to sound than people and they will hear the CD at volumes so low that you may not be able to hear it. The program should only be started once the firework season is over.

Counter-conditioning is the process where your pet associates the sound with something enjoyable such as feeding or playing. This is carried out after desensitisation with the aim of replacing the fearful feelings with feelings of pleasure.

The CD's should be used in conjunction with pheromone therapy and a range of CD's is available from your veterinary practice to help with other phobias such as traffic and children noise.

