



Preparations for phobic events [firework night]

Preparation is all-important if your dog is to get through firework night, or similar events, with the minimum of fear and stress. You need to make a special place where your dog can go to get away from the sounds he hates. In most cases, dogs will already have a favourite room to go to, in which case all you need to do is to modify this room to make it even more suitable as a hideout.

Some dogs don't know where to go to escape and for these individuals, we need to create somewhere for them to hide. It is best to choose a room that is naturally quiet and those that are located toward the centre of the house and have minimal number of windows are the most suitable. It is best to prepare the refuge at least 2 weeks ahead of the firework event.

Advance preparation: creating a refuge:

- Install a DAP diffuser in the home, preferably close to or inside the dog's hiding place. This should be left operating 24 hours a day from two weeks before the firework event until 2 weeks after. DAP makes dogs feel much more relaxed and confident when they might otherwise be stressed. Even if you only have a few days to go before the firework event you should still use DAP because it may help. It is available from your veterinary surgeon.
- Put in lots of blankets for your dog to dig and burrow in, preferably placed in a corner where the dog has already tended to dig or hide. Include an old, unwashed piece of clothing like a woolly jumper so that your dog can smell your scent and feel comforted by your indirect presence.
- The aim is to minimise the amount of noise entering the hideout room from outside and the dog must not see the flashes of the fireworks as they explode, so close the windows and use heavy curtains to make the room dark.
- Bowls of food and water are essential and it is a good idea to make sure that your dog has emptied his bladder an hour before the display starts.
- Leave a few special chews and things for your dog to eat in the hiding place in case your dog fancies something chewy to reduce his tension. However, don't be alarmed if he does not seem interested in them - some dogs are simply not interested in treats at a time like this!
- Moderately loud rhythmic music with a good beat is an effective way to mask the firework noises from outside, so put a hi-fi system in the room and keep the volume at a loud but comfortable level. However, every dog is an individual and if yours is not very partial to music at other times you should respect his personal taste!
- The designated hiding place must be accessible to your dog at all times, and it is vital to make sure that doors are fixed so that they cannot accidentally shut and trap the pet inside or out of the room.
- Get your dog used to going to the hiding place 2-3 times each day during the run up to a firework display by taking him/her there and giving some food or a favourite chew. This will help the dog to understand that this is a good place to go to.
- If you know that a firework display is due on a particular evening then give your dog a large stodgy carbohydrate-rich meal in the late afternoon on that day. Pasta, mashed potato or overcooked rice are ideal, and will help to make your dog feel calm and sleepy as the night draws in.

- Make sure your pet is kept in a safe and secure environment at all times so that it doesn't bolt and escape if a sudden noise occurs. Keep your dog on a leash in public places and make sure that gates, fences and doors are secure.

If your vet has given you medication to reduce your dog's fears make sure that you follow the prescription precisely.

When the noises start:

- As soon as the fireworks display starts lead your dog to the hiding place and encourage him to stay there.
- Don't get cross with your dog when he is scared, it will only make him more frightened.
- It is tempting to try to soothe your dog to relieve his fears, but this is the worst thing to do.
It gives your dog the impression that there is something to be frightened of, and may even reward him for being scared. Also, if your dog comes to think of you as the only person who can soothe the fears, then he may panic if there are fireworks when you aren't around to help.
- Ignore your dog when he is looking frightened and only show attention and affection when he has begun to relax. Then you can give your dog a game and some food treats as a reward.
- Finally, it is a good idea to try to keep your dog in a happy mood by playing lots of games and doing little bits of training using food rewards. This will stop him from falling into a state of anxious tension, but don't expect too much.
- Ignore the noises yourself and, if your pet is only mildly fearful, you could try to engage your pet in some form of active game. Try to appear happy and unconcerned. It can help if you play a game with another pet in the household, because the frightened one may be tempted to join in.
- If your pet is very frightened by the noises and cannot be encouraged to play then lead him or her to the refuge you have created.

If your dog is really terrified of fireworks then you could give him some earplugs to block out some of the noise. Doggy earplugs are easy to get from pet stores and your vet, but you can also make them out of rolls of wrung out damp cotton wool. However, it is important to take care and to make sure that you don't push them down too far into your dog's ear. You must also make sure that you remove them and throw them away afterwards! Care must be taken that the ear plug is not so thin that it falls out, or so fat that it hurts when you put it in.

Having got through fireworks this year you need to start to do something about your dog's phobia problems. Many dogs can be treated using behavioural methods called desensitisation and counter-conditioning. Specially made recordings of fireworks can be used to train dogs not to react to the noises they fear and a CD with full instructions made by Sounds Scary Ltd can be purchased through your vet.

www.SoundsScary.com

© Sounds Scary Ltd. 2003