



# FIREWORK PHOBIAS



## Top Tips for making fireworks less stressful for Dogs

Bonfire Night may go with a bang for you and your family, but it is estimated that approximately 60 per cent of pets become stressed and fearful during the firework season. To make matters worse, not only are many owners unaware how to help their pets with firework fears, veterinary professionals believe 71 per cent of owners are unable to spot the signs that their pets are unhappy.

Dogs and cats have very acute hearing and the noise from fireworks may actually be painful for them; it is therefore important that all owners prepare their pets for Bonfire Night and discuss this issue with their vets in plenty of time.

Owners of particularly fearful pets are advised to discuss behavioural programs with their vets well in advance of Bonfire Night. Dog owners should create a comforting 'den' for their pets on the night. Encourage pets to use the 'den' by hiding healthy food treats or toys there. The benefit of the 'den', which can be an enclosed bed or basket, can be maximised by plugging a D.A.P.<sup>®</sup> (Dog Appeasing Pheromone) Diffuser close to it. Switching the diffuser on around a week before Bonfire Night will allow the pheromone to build up to significant levels and ensure pets are as relaxed as possible before, during and after the firework season. In addition, D.A.P.<sup>®</sup> Spray can be used to give support on the night of the event. D.A.P.<sup>®</sup> is also available in a collar formulation, designed to reduce the dog's general level of stress.

Most cats manage their fear of loud noises by voluntarily staying indoors. Owners should encourage this behaviour and ensure that cats can access their favourite 'bolthole'. This may often be up high, for example on the top of cupboards. Plugging a Feliway<sup>®</sup> Diffuser in the room where the cat spends most of its time 48 hours before the festivities will also increase its sense of security.

## Top tips for firework night

1. Allow your dog or cat to retreat to its favourite hideaway. This bolthole is where they feel safe. You can further increase this feeling of security and wellbeing by plugging in a D.A.P.<sup>®</sup> or Feliway<sup>®</sup> Diffuser
2. On the evenings you expect fireworks, ensure your pet is safely inside and secure doors, windows and cat flaps
3. Make sure your dog or cat is microchipped. If they do escape, frightened, confused animals can easily get lost
4. In the run up to the firework season, ensure dogs are used to being taken for walks early in the evening and cats are provided with litter trays both before and during the firework season
5. Draw curtains to reduce the noise from outside and play music or have the TV on to help mask the noise of fireworks
6. Ignore any fearful behaviour and do not try to comfort your pet. A dog may pick up on your anxiety and this can make the problem worse. Cats prefer to be left to cope on their own
7. Do not punish your pet. This only confirms that there is something to be afraid of
8. Try not to go out while the fireworks are going off. Seeing you acting normally will help your pets feel more settled
9. Speak to your vet. D.A.P.<sup>®</sup> Spray can be used to give dogs additional support on the night of the event
10. If you are worried that your pet is taking a long time to recover from the firework festivities, speak to your vet.

## More information

### **Sound frequency and sound phobias**

Rooms have a characteristic resonance related to the dimensions. When the resonance increases the sound pressure level of the noises of which the dog is scared means that the dog will want to leave the room when the noise starts. Rooms with solid walls and a lightweight flat roof can function as a 'bass trap', artificially boosting low frequencies. In the UK this is typical of the construction of kitchens and household extensions, which makes them a dangerous choice of place to confine a pet during phobic events.

The phobic stimulus (such as fireworks) may itself have properties that make the situation worse. Many sound phobias are of low frequency sound like bangs and rumbles. High-frequency sounds are relatively directional and the high-frequency range is used by people and animals to localise the origin of the sound. Solid objects block or absorb them. Low-frequency sounds pass through most objects and are relatively non-directional.

This means that it can be very hard for the dog to mount a satisfactory escape route if it is in a confined area or an open space when it hears a sequence of loud noises. The sound level is the same regardless of where the animal goes and there is no sense of escape due to the change of context. In this situation the animal may become disorientate and confused, entering a state of panic because it is unable to get away. These dogs are at risk of developing anxiety over 'confinement' or restriction of escape response. Such dogs often show signs that are remarkably similar to separation anxiety; they will attempt to break out every time they are confined in particular room regardless of whether or not there is any noise event. The difference is that they are only concerned with getting out of the room or the house and have no interest in finding the owner.

### **Relaxation:**

Routinely encourage your dog to be relaxed and less 'anxious' on a daily basis. Relaxed behaviour tends to generalise to other areas.

### **Encourage differential behaviour:**

Inadvertently rewarding phobic behaviours with attention can be avoided by encouraging deferential behaviour throughout the day. This is easily achieved by teaching the dog that it must 'sit' and 'stay' and look happy and relaxed in order to achieve what it desires or needs, for example, food and treats, grooming and play, and even the owners attention.

### **Crating:**

Many dogs respond favourable to having a smaller space where they can feel secure (a 'safe haven'). However, some dogs panic at being put into an enclosed space no matter how airy it might be or wherever it is situated, and such dogs should never be forced into a crate. Instead it may be useful to make your dog a safe haven, behind the settee or

under a table. Dogs' innate behaviour is to burrow into a small dark space at times of stress so allow them to express this in the home during the firework season. Observe where they tend to hide and allow easy access to this area, leaving water and feed stations near by. Once the dog is burrowed into its 'safe haven' do not disturb him too often as he/she must feel safe and in control of this area.

If your dog normally enjoys being in a crate (e.g. choosing to sleep or to snack in it), it may be crated or isolated in a small room:

- The crate or room must be a safe one, with no dangling cords, no live electric outlets and in the case of a puppies no open water (such as a toilet) in which the pet might drown.
- The dog should be provided with a blanket or bedding, drinking water, toys and a biscuit.
- Never leave a loose collar or a harness or lead on the dog whilst in the crate. It is safest to remove even buckle collars, as these might catch on a crate and potentially strangle the dog – especially in the case of an anxious dog that moves around a lot.
- Anything that can be destroyed should be removed.
- If necessary, a protective covering may be placed against the walls of a room so that no damage is caused if the animal becomes upset; once a dog starts to do damage, the damaging process becomes self-perpetuating.
- If the dog starts to damage itself while crated, crating is NO LONGER an option.
- Crating should never be used as a punishment
- Crates and 'safe havens' or 'safe rooms' must be areas where the dog is content and feels secure.

### **Siting of Safe Areas**

Some dogs do best if they can observe the outside world and may be less concerned if a crate over looks glass doors or if a safe room has windows (making sure that the dog cannot overheat if the day is sunny). Some dog prefer to have all doors and windows closed and covered so that they cannot see the outside world. Observe your dog and decide which strategy works for your pet.

### **Range of medication available**

Today drug therapy is available to assist with firework related fear behaviour. These range from herbal remedies and DAP's (Dog Appeasing Pheromones – synthetic reconstruction of the pheromone from the mammary gland of whelping which has a calming effect). In cases of mild firework stressors to more serious conditions such as firework phobias which may require more intense, although temporary, drug therapy. Medical intervention is highly recommended in severe cases, because each time the dog experiences a fearful episode with fireworks, the fear becomes stronger and eventually becomes a phobic response. Please speak to your vet for more details about psychotropic drugs.