

# Scary Noises - Thunderstorms & Fireworks



## Why is my dog frightened by loud noises?

Fear of loud noises such as thunderstorms, fireworks, or gun shots is quite a common complaint from dog owners of all breeds. They notice their dog showing signs of fear and anxiety, sometimes well before a storm arrives, or see their dog panic when a sudden loud noises are encountered.

During storm season, local animal shelters and pounds brace for a flood of lost pets as many dogs that are housed outside get so scared they scale the fences of their yard in their panicked attempts to escape the noise and end up loose on the streets.

New Year's day is full of Facebook group messages about lost and found dogs that have escaped due to the noise of fireworks going off.

Although thunderstorms and fireworks tends to be the most common triggers for noise phobias, some dogs are also fearful when exposed to other sounds such as large trucks (especially those with air brakes), whipper snippers, starting pistols at the local athletics track, or even the vacuum cleaner!

For some dogs the fear of loud noises is based on a 'single event' learning experience, where the noise has been paired with a very frightening experience such as something falling on (or near) them during a storm.

For others the fear develops gradually with repeated exposures over time. Breeds that are particularly sound-sensitive, and those with a genetic predisposition to anxiety are often over-represented in cases of noise fears and phobias.

A combination of this genetic 'predisposition', lack of early experience, learned aversion, as well as underlying medical reasons may all contribute to the development of the fear response.

Your dog's sense of hearing is much more acute than yours, and they can hear a different range of frequencies, so it is hard to appreciate what they are experiencing.



## But it is normal isn't it?

Surprisingly, many owners do not consider the welfare implications associated with their dog showing signs of distress during storms or loud noises.

Some owners even consider the reactions of their dog 'normal' – 'Oh yes he is dreadful during storms, hides, pants, salivates, but don't all dogs do that?'

There is quite a bit that can be done to help alleviate your pet's distress. But often owners only seek help when their dog's reaction is quite severe – maybe they have escaped and injured themselves or their pet has caused quite a bit of damage to the house – and by this time the problem can be much harder to address.

***Seeking good advice early on, can mean your pet copes much better, and the problem does not worsen over time to a point where they are hurt or injured.***

## Is it noise sensitivity, fear or phobia?

In the early stages, the symptoms displayed by the dog might include shivering, shaking, salivating and hiding. Some dogs become very clingy and will only settle when in the presence of their owner.

Dogs at this level of distress will usually still accept food or treats, and will often still engage in activities such as a favourite game or will play with toys if encouraged. These dogs are classified as having a 'fear of noises' or a 'noise sensitivity'.

The more severe reactions can be classed as a true 'noise phobia'. Phobic dogs lose control of their actions as 'panic' sets in. These dogs may still shiver and shake, but this is often accompanied by other actions such as trying to flee or trying to reach shelter without any regard for their own safety. Even their favourite treats cannot distract them – they are truly terrified.

Dogs trying to run from the fearful noise will often escape their yard – sometimes leading to injury either in the escape process or when running onto roads. Others attempt to find sanctuary by trying to access the house, other buildings, or spaces. These dogs can do great damage to property and to themselves in the process.

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*It is not uncommon for dogs with a true noise phobia to have other anxiety related behaviour problems (such as separation anxiety/distress) and these animals often require referral to a Veterinary Behaviourist to fully address their problems.*

## So what can I do to help my dog when he is fearful of noises?

### First things first – a visit to the vet

Although there is a lot of information available to pet owners on the internet, your first port of call should be your veterinarian. There are a number of health issues that can contribute to the way your pet hears things – so we need to rule these out first.

Your veterinarian may also discuss the use of medication to help lower your pet's level of anxiety to a point where they are able to learn new strategies to cope.

### Can the offending noise be avoided?

With each exposure to the fear inducing noises, there is the potential for your pet to become increasingly sensitised, so the first steps it to look at ways to avoid the noise. This strategy can work well for predictable noises such as fireworks on New Year's Eve, lawn mowers, and vacuum cleaners but is not so helpful for things like thunderstorms.

- » Maybe the dog goes for a walk to the park whilst the lawn is cut or the house vacuumed by another family member.
- » Maybe the dog comes inside for a while whilst the neighbour uses his whipper snipper.
- » Or maybe you plan ahead and book your dog a night at a quiet boarding kennel in the country on New Year's Eve.

Sometimes even playing music (that is not fear-inducing to the dog) may help to 'drown out' the other fear inducing sounds if they are not too loud.

### Providing a 'Safe Place'

As many dogs with noise fears tend to try to 'hide' when fearful, providing a 'safe place' for them to go when frightened is something that needs to be explored. This may be difficult to achieve outside in the back yard, although providing access to at least part of the house, or to the garage may be an answer.

Your dog will have already given you some hints about areas where it might feel safer. Some prefer small, dark, enclosed places. Others may prefer a place near their owner.

Sometimes the place chosen by the dog might not be appropriate (such as inside a wall cavity or under the house), so it is up to you to provide an alternate place where the dog can go when it is frightened.

One option is to teach the dog to use a crate, or provide another dark, enclosed space for the dog to curl up in.

### Learning to recognise when your dog is anxious

You will need to start to watch your dog's body language closely. We want to be able to recognize the body language signals that indicate your dog is calm and relaxed, and also learn what the early signs are when he is starting to get anxious.

The body language signs of anxiety can be quite subtle, so you might need help from an experienced person to help you to recognise them. Once you can recognize the early signs of anxiety it is possible to step in and work towards calming the dog before the reaction gets out of hand.

### Teaching the dog 'Calm'

Just like teaching 'Sit' or 'Drop', it is possible to reward calm behaviour over time and have a cue for 'Calm'.

The first step to teaching a dog to calm on cue involves selecting a 'safe place' then teaching the dog to go to this place on a normal day when there are totally relaxed and there are no scary noises.

The safe place might be a crate, a special bed or a mat in a certain room. The safe place can be made inviting with soft bedding, things to chew on such as a pig's ear, and can even be scented with essential oils to provide a scent cue for 'calm'

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Lying down and sitting are both considered 'calmer' positions – it is very hard for a dog to be reactive when he is sitting or dropped.

You can work on teaching your dog to lie down at its safe place by rewarding even short periods of lying down – but remember some dogs when very stressed will freeze or 'shut down' and just because they are still does not mean they are OK.

With lots of repetition, the dog learns that every time he goes to this place, he relaxes. This way, when a storm does come, or there are fearful noises, the dog can be taken to his 'safe place' and encouraged to lie there.

If you are using a crate, it can be covered to further insulate it from the noises and to block out visual stimuli such as lightning flashes.

## **Make the scary noise a cue for a favourite game or activity**

For dogs who are showing only the milder symptoms of anxiety, it may be possible to pair the fearful noises with treats, walks, or games that the dog really enjoys.

Behaviours like playing and eating are incompatible with fearful behaviours. Whenever they hear the noise, the game begins, so soon they associate the noise with the onset of a pleasant experience.

## **Desensitisation using recordings**

There are a number of sound recordings available on the market that aim to simulate the sound of thunder, as well as other percussive noises such as gunshots and fireworks.

The idea behind these is to desensitise the dog to the noise by starting counter conditioning techniques with the recording at a level where no fear is elicited. Gradually over time, if the dog shows no signs of fear, the volume is raised very slowly.

Many good breeders and puppy schools incorporate low level sound recordings in their programs designed to socialise youngsters and help set them up for success.

## **Important!**

*There is a very fine line between desensitising (which is what you want) and sensitising (making things much worse) so you will probably need professional guidance to make sure you get this right.*

## **I have tried lots of things, but the dog will not settle....**

If you have tried providing a safe place, playing games or desensitization and your dog's fear is still quite marked it probably needs professional help to reduce its anxiety.

Treating fear is very different to training – so be very wary of trainers who promise quick fixes or who use 'dominance theory' to explain your dog's reaction. You know yourself if you are scared, that people yelling or pushing you around only makes things worse!

## **Using Medication**

Your Veterinarian or Veterinary Behaviourist are the only people who should be prescribing medication to address anxiety. Online, herbal supplements may help in some cases, but most dogs require proper anti-anxiety medications that are only available by prescription.

Medication is designed to lower anxiety and prevent the worsening of the fear over time. There are a number of medications used for noise fears and phobias, so you will need to discuss these with your veterinarian.

If your dog's reaction is severe, then you may want to ask for a referral to a Veterinary Behaviourist. These are veterinarians who also have a behaviour qualification and are experienced in seeing dogs with severe reactions to noise.

Phobic dogs often need life-long medication and behaviour modification so that they can learn to better cope when there are loud noises.

