

Fears, Phobias and Fireworks

What are Fears and Phobias?

Many dogs are afraid of sudden loud noises such as thunder or fireworks - especially around Guy Fawkes night and New Year. It is a miserable time for both you and your companion when your pet becomes nervous as a result of a fear or phobia.

Normal Fear is a healthy control that protects us from danger and is largely proportional to the risk of harm.

Phobic Fear is so intense and out of context that it limits normal behaviour. When we treat dogs with fears and especially sound phobias we want to alter the emotional reaction to the noise so that the dog no longer feels fear when the noise is heard. The way that we can treat fears and phobias is through behavioural treatment techniques called desensitisation and counter-conditioning.

About Desensitisation and Counter-Conditioning.

Desensitisation can be used to reduce an anxious or fearful response to stimulus (e.g. fireworks or thunder). Desensitisation is a method used to gradually reduce the animal's response to noises so that the reaction to stimuli is less dramatic - until finally there is no response to the sound at all. What can be done?

Using a D.A.P. (Dog Appeasing Pheromone) diffuser

In mammals, all lactating females release substances called "appeasing" pheromones, the function of which is to reassure the offspring. D.A.P. mimics the properties of the natural appeasing pheromones of the bitch by replicating the signal of well-being:- It helps stop or prevent fear and stress-related signs in puppies and adult dogs, including:

- Destruction
- Vocalisation
- House soiling
- Excessive licking

Plug in a DAP diffuser in the room most used by the dog. The duration of use may be adapted according to individual needs. One diffuser lasts approx 4 weeks and is active from 50 to 70 sq m.

Using a Sounds Scary CD

Sounds Scary is a company set up by two British vets – Sarah Heath and Jon Bowen - who exclusively treat behaviour problems in companion animals. The CD uses desensitisation and counter-conditioning to repeatedly present the same stimuli (e.g. fireworks) in association with something that the dog is known to enjoy (e.g. food/play). Don't expect too much too soon. desensitisation and counterconditioning can take weeks, if not months, before any noticeable change in the dog's response is seen - but eventually the dog will learn to remain relaxed in the presence of loud noises.

Sedatives and Tranquilisers

Although sedatives and tranquilizer tablets have traditionally been prescribed in the past to treat fears and phobias in the short term, new research has shown that this type of drug blocks the motor activity but sensitises the dog to auditory stimulation - meaning that the dog is immobile and unable to hide but can still hear the fireworks therefore making him more fearful to future noises. There are other types of drug therapy which can be used in conjunction with Desensitisation and Counter- Conditioning which may help speed up the process. As part of our usual procedure, drugs cannot be dispensed without prior consultation with one of our vets. Noise and fear phobias can take some time to identify and treat, however we are happy to offer assistance where we can.

Checklist

Here is a checklist for short-term preventative guidance which can help in making your dog feel secure during thunderstorms and firework displays.

- Do not take a sound sensitive dog to places where phobic events are likely, e.g. fields where there is shooting or a crow-scarer.
- Avoid close proximity to the launch of fireworks where dogs will hear whistles and whooshes that could cause sensitisation to other sounds.
- Do not restrict access to escape routes unless there is a very important reason to do so (e.g. behind a TV). Try to open up opportunities to escape (e.g. cupboard under the stairs or under a bed).
- Do not sympathise with or get angry with a fearful or phobic dog as either will add to the emotional intensity of the situation and will increase the likelihood of future problems.
- Do not force animals to confront their fears by, for example, dragging them to places where they are reluctant to go.

Please feel free to ask our vets for advice

