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Help your dog cope with fireworks





Fireworks from your dog's point of view

Put yourself in your dog's position. Everything at night normally sounds, looks and smells familiar. Seasons change gradually. Then, all of a sudden, an acrid aroma fills the air, loud bangs surround you and there are flashes of light – all for apparently no reason at all. You can't tell where it is coming from, whatever you try, it does not stop, and you can't even get away.

If you were that animal, what would YOU try to do?



If you already know that your pet suffers with extreme anxiety, we strongly recommend that you contact an experienced and properly accredited behaviour professional, such as an APBC member www.apbc.org.uk

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Our experts Karen, Muriel and Debbie designed this handout using the best advice and tips available to make sure that fireworks become non-threatening, fear of fireworks becomes avoidable and best of all, fireworks become an enjoyable part of your pets' lives.

We recommend you choose at least four options from our suggestions, as a bare minimum. The booklet is split into three main sections so there's help available for you, no matter how much time you have before the fireworks event.

We also recommend that before attempting any kind of behaviour modification or training you make absolutely sure that your dog is not suffering from any medical conditions. A check-up with your vet is a sensible precaution and part of your commitment to your dog's long-term welfare.

Still time? How to Plan Ahead

We inoculate our dogs against possible diseases and we socialise and train them well to turn them into good citizens. Preparing your dog for fireworks night, and indeed any sudden loud noises, should be a normal part of this process.

Turn Chaos into Calm

Our aim is to make fireworks noise as 'normal' to your pet as possible. Sounds odd, but we want your dog to feel like fireworks are just another part of their everyday environment and will come and go without any danger.

Ideally we would like them to associate any fireworks noise with fun and games, attention and treats from you. We would like fireworks to become a familiar and predictable event for your pets, one that signifies happiness and relaxation!

Acclimatisation through sound/sight

It's time to prepare your dog for the potential noises/sights they may experience.

Using the 'Fireworks' MP3

Download our **free MP3** of fireworks noises from www.dogsandfireworks.com. You can play it directly from your computer, export it to an MP3 player or burn it onto a CD.

There is also a video available which should be used in the same way as described below to accustom to visual/light changes.

- Set your CD player/computer/MP3 speaker volume to its lowest setting. Turn screen brightness down low (video)
- Play the file as background noise to your everyday activities. Begin with volume/brightness as low as possible. Gradually increase until there is the barest flicker of attention.
- Play on loop at this volume/brightness whilst going about your everyday business. Avoid sitting around staring at your pet to see whether or not they react!
- Gradually, over a period of days, increase the volume/brightness but only do this when there is no longer any reaction. Any increase should be minimal so that your dog is not aware of what is happening.
- Begin to associate feeding time, or use delicious food your dog does not normally get, for times when the sound/video is quietly playing. It is unlikely that a dog that is enjoying food will additionally experience fear. Promote the enjoyment factor in relation to the sounds/video playing quietly, and gradually as you increase the intensity they will cease to have a worrying effect.
- You may wish to do some additional training, or playing with your dog whenever the sound/video is playing. Our aim is 'firework noise = FUN'.
- If your dog is sensitive to other sounds, why not record your own and compile them onto a CD. They should just become part of the background noise.

Build a beautiful bolt-hole

When you are feeling a bit unhappy, often it can be a relief to hide under the duvet. Your pet can feel great comfort from retiring to a familiar den where they have learned that nice things can happen and no harm will come to them.

- Decide on an area where you feel your pet will be happiest - at your feet, near the radiator, next to the TV, or somewhere your pet has previously chosen. Avoid areas next to outside walls or windows.
- Provide a crate, large sturdy cardboard box, pet travel container or similar. Ensure safety from sharp edges and do not use anything that may cause suffocation should your pet get stuck. It should be big enough that the dog can stand up and turn around. Your aim is not to lock your pet inside, so you don't need to worry about a 'door' that can be closed.
- Pad the container out with comfortable and safe bedding. Clean, old blankets can easily be obtained from



- freecycle or your local charity shop.
- Drape blankets or old curtains over the crate to further insulate against flashes of light and noise. Add an extra layer of blankets underneath the crate to protect from vibrations through the floor.
- Teach your pet that the den is a safe and enjoyable place to be. Feed them in there, leave water readily available nearby, and attach favourite chew toys inside.
- Your pet needs to learn that their den is the best place to go if they are feeling at all stressed. You may want to place an old item of your clothing in there as a further familiar signal.
- If your pet chooses their own bolt-hole, do not try and coax them out. Make the best of their choice by insulating it as described above. Likewise do not force the pet to enter the den. Make it an attractive place to be, using food, nice smells, warmth, and attention from you when they enter.

Prepare your house too

- Think how you are going to soundproof your house, or at least the rooms you spend most time in and the room where your pet sleeps.
- Draw the curtains early – thicker curtains are best. Not a bad investment, as this can also insulate against heat loss! Thicker curtains will deaden sound and prevent flashes of light disturbing your pet.
- Secure all doors and windows. Hanging a blanket at a window, or around any gaps in doors, can block out extra noise very effectively.
- You may wish to lay out newspaper or a puppy pad or two to allow your dog to toilet indoors. If they are likely to empty themselves through fear, you can at least try to direct this behaviour to a place that is easy for you to clear up.

Building independence

Are you planning to go out over the fireworks season? Most of us will want to attend a display at some point. Have you prepared your pet for being left alone at this time?

- Accustom your pet to the sounds and to the den as described above.
- Ask a neighbour, friend or family member to pet sit that evening whilst you are away. Make sure your pet is familiar with them being in the house – fireworks night

is **not** the time to attempt to socialise with new visitors!

- Once you have your pet's safe den in place, and have been playing the fireworks sound file for some time, practise leaving the house and then coming straight back in. Gradually build up the time spent away.
- **Always** act unconcerned when you enter and when you leave.
- If your pet begins to show signs of stress when you go through your normal 'departure' routine, you should aim to vary this. For

example, if your pet does not mind when you go out of the back door instead of the front, this shows that they have probably not linked this exit with the fact that you are leaving them alone. Use this opportunity to add in the positive associations in this booklet.

- Get your pet used to the fact that you may not always be with them when it is dark and noises may be going on outside.

Microchipping and ID tags

Ensure your pet is micro chipped. A frightened and disorientated animal can easily get lost.

By law, in the UK dogs should wear a collar and ID tag when out in public. It is most likely that if your pet runs away in fear, a neighbour will pick them up and need to know who to call or where to return them. Your average neighbour does NOT have microchip scanning equipment!



Act early, and with a bit of preparation, you can do a lot to make your dog feel more relaxed whenever fireworks are around.

Remedies and medications

Consider using the D.A.P.(or Feliway for cats) range of plug-ins, sprays and collars. These can sometimes have dramatic effect but often just help alleviate the more extreme signs of stress. The plug in diffuser will cover a reasonable area within the home, the spray can be used in specific areas and for travel and of course, the animal wears the collar. These products are easily available via the Internet, so do shop around. Aim to start use at least two weeks before the firework season starts and keep it up. Leave DAP plug-ins switched on, keep collar on the animal or continue the spray usage regularly.

There are a lot of herbal remedies on the market for stress-relieving purposes. Again, they will not simply 'cure' the problem but they can alleviate some anxiety.

Your vet can also recommend medication to help with the problem. Our recommendation is that you have a practice run should you decide to use tranquiliser medication. This is to prevent any further problems occurring that your dog will only associate with fireworks noise. However, some medications only deal with the symptoms of the stress so whilst externally the dog may appear less anxious, the fear is still present. You should discuss this in detail with your vet.

With any remedy you must always remember that fear avoidance is a strongly developed survival instinct that your pet is demonstrating. A simple tablet or spray is unlikely to remove that by itself. You will still need to prepare with the tips we have supplied in this booklet.

Other essential tips

Avoid walking your dog after dusk during fireworks season. Behaviour consultants report that phobia cases often develop from a single event on or around Nov 5th. If you are anxious that your dog will not get enough exercise, consider giving your dog a walk in the middle of the day, or even employing a dog walker to do this for you. Get your pet into the new routine in plenty of time.

Consider feeding your dog earlier in the day so that if they do become stressed, their eating will not be affected. If your dog suffers from diarrhoea as a result of the stress, consider feeding them in the morning and give them plenty of opportunity to empty themselves before dusk.

No time? First Aid Emergency

Suddenly and without warning, off go the fireworks in your neighbourhood. You need to act quickly. Here's some immediate help:

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- **Don't act worried.** Keep your normal tone of voice, in fact, sound and act happy.
- Remember that voice you reserve for the times your dog does their party trick for the family, or comes back when you call them straightaway? Use it!
- Get your dog to play their favourite game with a toy, or give them their treat ball or the nicest chew you can find.
- If you have several dogs in your household, playing with the less affected dogs may help change the atmosphere to one of enjoyment for the more stressed dog.
- Above all, do NOT tell your pet off. They are experiencing a normal (even if undesirable) fear reaction, and getting upset yourself will only make things more stressful for everyone.

Build in predictability

- If your dog is food-motivated, perhaps do a little bit of training (just a sit will do). Training an existing command brings familiarity to your dog – and we all know that predictable environments are calming especially when food is involved. (This calming trick is also used when trainers take their dogs to a competition).
- If you normally stroke your dog a few times then tell it to lie on its bed, avoid lots of patting and stroking – your pet may wonder why you are acting differently.
- **DO** provide comfort, however. If your pet seeks reassurance with you, please, please feel free to provide cuddles and comfort. It is unlikely that this is going to make their fear worse. It may, however, become an enjoyable habit that you might prefer to restrict to fireworks time!

Turn on the TV & Radio

A little louder than usual, perhaps. In the next room, turn on the radio or TV tuned to a different channel.

Upstairs, consider turning on another TV or radio, on yet another channel. You are attempting to 'criss-cross' the firework sound with other noises, to make individual sounds hard to distinguish. (To be more eco-friendly, I have two wind-up radios that I use for this purpose. In this way I don't use too much electricity!)

You might wish to warn your neighbours that your TV will be louder than usual for this purpose. Do respect local laws with regard to neighbourhood noise (11pm until 7am are regarded as 'night hours' within the Noise Act 2006 under UK Law). Perhaps consider moving your TV, radios, pet and den into a room that does not directly adjoin your neighbour's house.

Long Term Solutions – a programme for life



- Go back to stage 1 of this booklet to begin preparing for the future.
- Teach yourself to recognise the early signs of stress in your pet. Dogs will often pace around, lick their lips, yawn and pant. Try to act, calmly, the very first second you recognise these signs.
- Some dogs are more sensitive to sound than others. This may simply be that they have had a nasty experience in the past. Certain breeds of dog do seem to be more sound sensitive, which indicates there may be a genetic predisposition.
- It also may be that some dogs simply cope better than others with stressful events. This is evident in multi-dog households, where one dog seems to be fine and another is hiding away. Be aware that dogs will learn from each other so take precautions, such as the measures above, to prevent yourself ending up with a household filled with anxious pets.
- Whilst fear and stress are by no means an inevitable consequence of fireworks or other loud sounds, you should consider that your dog may be suffering from extreme fear. In an already sensitive dog, this can be harmful. Aim to recognise if this description fits your pet.
- Be aware that a frightened dog can show signs of aggression. Do not attempt to force anything on your dog and do not allow other pets or children to pester the worried animal.
- If other methods are only having limited effect, you should perhaps consider your pet's ideal and your safest option – avoidance. Some owners take their animals away, in their car or caravan, to remote areas where fireworks are unlikely. If you target this to the specific times and dates when fireworks are most likely to be let off, this will at least save your pet from long term distress.
- Lower-noise fireworks are available. Make friends and neighbours aware that this choice is available. If it is YOUR fireworks display you are planning, consider the effects on neighbourhood animals and do warn people in the vicinity (as well as making sure YOUR pet is well away from the area, too.)
- Pick up and dispose of any firework litter you may find, as this can be harmful to animals if eaten. (Remember to let it cool down first.) If you think your pet is sensitive to the smell of fireworks, keep some firework remnants in a box that your pet cannot open, but perhaps leave air holes to allow the scent out. Leave the fireworks around the house, including near where you normally feed your pet – again you are linking a nice experience (food) with a possibly unpleasant one (firework smell).

Get yourself a professional or seek professional help

If your pet appears to be struggling to recover from fireworks, please see your vet for referral to an accredited, qualified and experienced behaviour specialist. A good professional will give you plenty of advice for planning ahead and will help you survive through the firework season.

Remember - continued exposure to stress for your pet can lead to severe long-term psychological damage.

If your pet has gone missing

Search your local area, as it is likely your dog will be hiding nearby.

You may wish to contact your local police station, and the dog warden at the local council. It is also advisable to contact veterinary surgeons and rescue centres in the area in case your dog has been handed in.

If you find your pet and they are injured

Contact your local veterinary surgeon immediately. It is likely they will have an answer machine giving a 24 hour emergency call number

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