

Firework phobias

Although the sunny days are still with us and the nights are only just starting to draw in, this is the time of year when pet owners should start making plans to help their pets through another season of fireworks.

One of the biggest problems with tackling a fear of fireworks is that the tendency is to start worrying about it only when the first fireworks are heard. At this point all your vet can do to help your pet through the season is to dispense sedatives. It would be better for all concerned to be able to do more. Here are some commonly asked questions about fireworks phobias along with their answers:

Why are some animals so frightened of fireworks?

The noise is very loud, unpredictable and it is difficult for the animals to work out where it is coming from, so their instinct to survive creates a fearful response. Normally fear is useful, because it means that animals avoid potentially dangerous things, but if they cannot be avoided, and the fear goes on and on, it becomes a serious problem and no longer useful to anyone.

What kind of serious problem are we talking about?

It is bad enough having a distressed pet during the firework season, but some animals go on to “generalise” about noises and will become frightened of car doors shutting or even the kettle clicking off because they have become too sensitive to noises. Some owners cannot even walk their dogs after the firework season is over because they are so frightened of going outside.

Won't they just get used to fireworks as each year passes?

No. If they are distressed by fireworks one year they will either be just as frightened next year, or get worse. They will not improve unless they are helped.

How can I help my pet?

Exposing puppies and kittens to all sorts of noises (not enough to scare them!) in a controlled way and making sure they are never left alone or vulnerable during early exposure to fireworks can help prevent the problem starting. Drawing the curtains, creating a den and playing loud music can help block the noise.

Some dogs can be helped during fireworks by the use of sedatives, about which your vet can advise you. The best of these leave your dog normal and alert, but not so frightened, rather than sleepy all the time. It is important to realise that dogs cannot learn while they are on sedatives so they will not remember to be OK next time. Sedatives are a strategic way of coping with a firework phobia, not a cure.

What is ‘noise desensitisation’?

Curing such fears can sometimes be done with the help of desensitisation. Start by finding out if your dog responds to firework noises on the TV or radio. If they do not show anxiety when you play firework noises, however loud the bangs and whistles, there is no point in continuing with desensitisation. However, if they do you respond to the noises you can purchase a CD with sounds on from a number of sources:

- Your veterinary surgeon may have copies for sale,
- The Company of Animals Ltd (01932 566696)

www.companyofanimals.co.uk/soundscd.php

- or Sounds Scary Ltd www.soundsscary.com

These come with instructions as to how to help your pet with sound desensitisation. You should be starting this now as there is no point in performing this process when the frightening noises are actually happening.

Pheromones

Your vet may also advise you about a pheromone diffuser, one for dogs and one for cats. These produce chemical messages of reassurance similar to those the animals use between themselves and can be helpful alongside behaviour therapy.

Supplementation

There is a new product, available from your veterinary practice, that may help to relax your pet. If their anxiety is severe, it is likely that you will need to start this supplementation at least a month before fireworks start and continuing through it. This product is called Zylkene and is safe and non-sedating.

What if desensitisation doesn't work?

If your dog is very frightened, or if you think that they have “generalised noise phobia” or they do not respond to noises on CD, you should ask for help from a behaviourist. It is better to ask your vet to recommend one since, unfortunately, anyone can call themselves a behaviourist even if they have no training.

What about cats and rabbits?

Cats get scared of fireworks too, but they tend to hide, whereas dogs often pace, pant, dig and behave in a more obviously distressed manner. Make sure that your cat's chosen hiding place is accessible and comfortable; provide some extra food, water and an extra litter tray nearby so that they do not have to go far. This will make the whole process of hiding less stressful. If your cat is clearly very distressed or stays frightened after fireworks, ask for help from a behaviourist. Pheromones (Feliway) and Zylkene are also available for cats.

If your rabbit is in a hutch bring it indoors, into a garage for example and provide them with deep bedding and areas to hide.

Fear and the anticipation of fear can cause real suffering. Don't delay – ask your practice for help now.