

Firework and other noise phobias

If your dog has experienced fear during the recent November the fifth celebrations then you may be wondering what to do next year, or at the millennium.

People are already stockpiling fireworks for New Year's eve, and it is likely that this will be a big event for firework enthusiasts.

The time to act is now.

Many dogs can be conditioned to tolerate the loud noises and flashes that are associated with fireworks. Even those who currently cannot cope can be helped to cope by providing them with a means of escaping from the noise, or making the home a more relaxing place for them.

Sedative drugs such as ACP (small yellow tablets) are often used to sedate or calm dogs during storms or fireworks, but these only have limited use.

Dogs that have become sensitive to the sound of fireworks often become fearful of related sounds, such as the loud bang of a crow-scarer. These sorts of sounds may be much more common in certain parts of the country, and dogs will then need long term treatment that ACP cannot offer.

As a sedative, ACP cannot be given for long periods and in any case it only works as a temporary solution.

It is much better to seek advice from your vet about methods for treating and reducing the fear or phobia that the animal is suffering from.

Here are some Do's and Don'ts for when the noise starts:

- Drugs may be useful in some cases, but should only be used under veterinary supervision. If using any such remedies, they should be given so they take effect BEFORE any noise starts or panic sets in.
- Don't punish your dog when he is scared, it only confirms that there was something to be afraid of.
- Don't fuss or try to reassure your dog when he is scared, as this rewards the behaviour.
- Ignore any fearful behaviour that occurs for no good reason.
- Feed your dog a good meal rich in carbohydrate with added vitamin B6 mid to late afternoon so he has a full stomach over the evening (don't try this if your dog is prone to diarrhoea when it is scared or at other times). If necessary don't feed him at any other time in the day to ensure a good appetite.
- Make sure your dog is kept in a safe and secure environment at all times so that it doesn't bolt and escape if a sudden noise occurs.
- When the season begins try to move your dog to a blacked out room at sundown with toys etc for him and preferably things for you to do as well, so he is not abandoned in the room. Blacking out the room removes the potentially additional problems of flashing lights etc. If your dog shows preference to retreat to a particular part of the house then this would be a good choice of room to black out.
- Put some music on, if your dog (and you) can tolerate it rap or something with a lot of constant drumbeats is best. It doesn't have to be obnoxiously loud as long as there is a constant distracting beat to the music.
- Ignore the noises yourself and try to engage your pet in some form of active game. Try to appear happy and unconcerned.
- If you know of a dog that is not scared by the noises and which gets on with your own dog then keeping the two together during the evenings may help. Playing with the non-fearful dog if your own dog becomes scared may help to encourage the fearful dog that all is not so bad after all.
- **Earplugs** can be made, by taking a piece of cotton wool, dampening it and squeezing out any excess water. It is then rolled into a long thin cylinder and twisted into the dog's ear so as to pack the canal. Care must be taken that the cylinder is not so thin that it goes too deep into the ear canal or so fat that it can't be secured. The plug should be secure and firm but not so tight that it irritates your dog. Remember to remove it later that day and don't reuse earplugs from one day to the next.

Don't just ignore the problem just because it only happens once or twice a year. Instigate a desensitisation programme once the season is over and you have control over the environment again.

